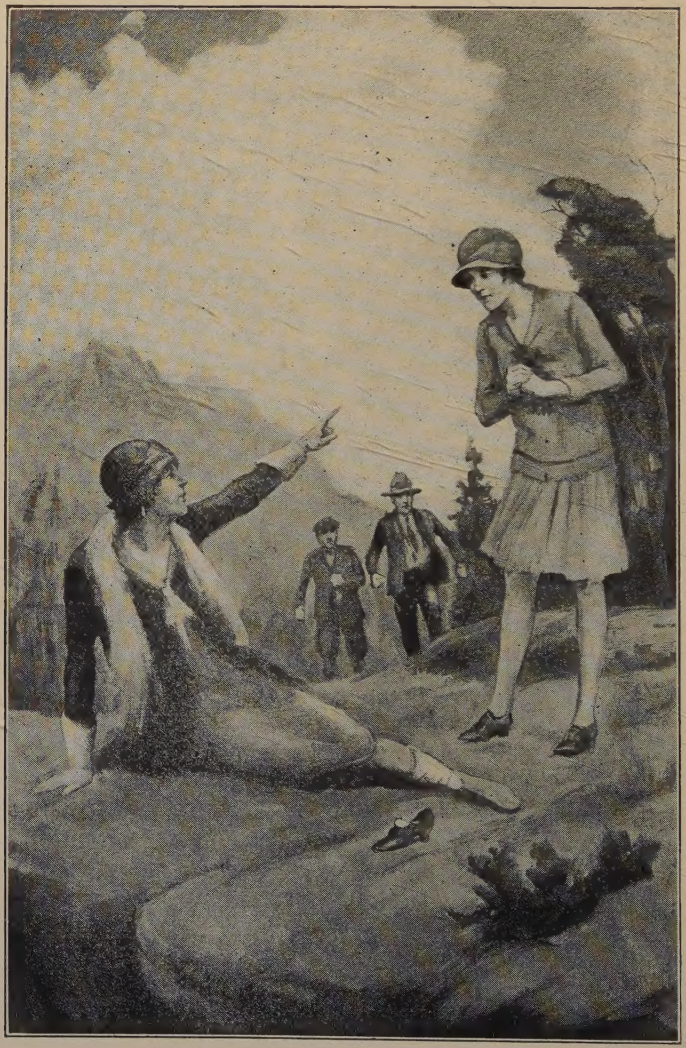
RUTH FIELDING CLEARING HER NAME

ALICE B. EMERSON

Nancy Smith



"SHE PUSHED ME OFF THE CLIFF," MRS. SPITZ TOLD THE TWO MEN.

Ruth Fielding Clearing Her Name

OR

THE RIVALS OF HOLLYWOOD

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL," "RUTH FIELDING IN THE SADDLE," "RUTH FIELDING AT CAMERON HALL," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

BOOKS FOR GIRLS

By ALICE B. EMERSON

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated.

RUTH FIELDING SERIES

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CUPPLES & LEON CO., PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

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RUTH FIELDING CLEARING HER NAME

Printed in U. S. A.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Unwelcome Guest	1
II.	A Second Call	10
III.	The Work Begins	20
IV.	The Anonymous Letter	28
V.	Ruth Begins to Worry	37
VI.	An Accident	45
VII.	The Explosion	52
VIII.	A Business Transaction	61
IX.	A Threat	70
X.	A New Problem	76
XI.	The Newspaper Story	86
XII.	The Encounter	92
XIII.	An Outing	102
XIV.	The Gale	108
XV.	Chess Investigates	121
XVI.	More Humiliation	126
XVII.	Into the Mountains	134
XVIII.	Ruth Holds Her Own	141
XIX.	A New Danger	151

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XX.	The Last Day	160
XXI.	To the Rescue	164
XXII.	A Rescuer	172
XXIII.	The Tables Turn	180
XXIV.	A Night Ride	191
XXV.	Ruth's Great Triumph . .	203

RUTH FIELDING CLEARING HER NAME

CHAPTER I

THE UNWELCOME GUEST

"Now that the last picture is hung, I guess we're settled," Tom Cameron, hammer still in hand, dropped down upon the davenport and smiled tenderly at Ruth Fielding, his bride of four months.

"Settled, did you say?" Ruth's eyes twinkled as she asked the question. "There are plenty of other pictures to come, you know."

"Meaning, I suppose, that an old strip of celluloid film is about to come between me and my happy home." Tom shook his head in mock sorrow.

"No danger of that, Tommy dear." Ruth squeeezed her husband's hand comfortingly. "You know I'd give up the moving pictures in a minute if I thought——"

"I was only joking, Ruth. You've worked hard to make a name for yourself, and I want

you to keep it. I don't mind if the public knows you as Ruth Fielding, as long as I know you're Mrs. Cameron." Tom slipped his arm about Ruth's slender waist and drew her closer. "I don't want marriage to cramp your style."

"So far, it seems to have intensified it! Now that we're back from our honeymoon in Europe, my ambitions are percolating more furiously than ever."

"Hollywood is in your blood, I guess." Tom sighed, as though reconciled to his fate. "You haven't been the same since we stepped off the train and you sniffed the moving picture atmosphere. You have more money now than you can ever use, and more honor than you want. I don't see why you go on directing pictures. The work's too hard, Ruth. I wish you could take life easy."

"But I work because I love it, Tom. Work doesn't seem hard when you're absorbed in it."

Ruth's eyes became dreamy as she relapsed into silence. For four long months, during the delightful honeymoon in Europe, she had sternly refused to think of moving pictures. To forget had not been easy, for everywhere she had gone she had been fêted as the winner of the international scenario contest. The success of the prize picture which she personally directed, had brought her even more fame and had made it practically impossible to drop from the limelight.

Now that Hollywood claimed her once more, Ruth was eager to return to the studio.

"I know you're dreaming over that big college picture you promised Mr. Hammond you'd direct for the Alectrion Film Corporation," Tom grumbled good-naturedly. "When will the grind start?"

"Just as soon as I can get my company together —and it won't be a grind." Ruth came to life with a self-conscious start. "Mr. Hammond promised me that I could select my own cast. The responsibility worries me, because the success of the picture will depend largely upon my ability to select suitable characters."

"No need to worry on that score, Ruth. You're just naturally a good picker. Didn't you pick me?"

"Well, of all the conceit! Seriously, it isn't going to be easy to find the actors I want. So many of the good actors are temperamental, and I've found from experience that they're usually an expensive investment. I've chosen my principals, but there are a number of minor parts to be cast."

"How about Fred Orman? Are you using him?"

"Yes, I've given him one of the best parts. Since that time when I helped him get a start he's certainly demonstrated his worth. I'd like to give Jack Markham a part too, but unfortu-

nately he's better as an aviator than as an actor. I'll always have a warm spot in my heart for Jack Markham because he helped rescue you when you were held captive by the bank robbers," she added.

"And I'll always have a warm feeling——"

Tom broke off abruptly as the door bell gave a sharp ring. He glanced inquiringly at Ruth, for to his knowledge few of their friends knew of their arrival in Hollywood.

"Only here three days, and already folks are starting in to mob you," he complained. "I'll bet it's some one who wants you to do more work. If you say the word, I'll tell the maid not to answer the door."

The suggestion came too late, for even as Tom spoke, they heard the outside door close, and a moment later the maid handed Ruth an engraved card. As Ruth glanced down at it, the expression on her face underwent a change. She frowned slightly, and thoughtfully tapped the card on the edge of the table.

"Who is it, Ruth?" Tom asked curiously, for he saw that Ruth was disturbed.

"Mrs. Craven-Spitz."

"What a name! Seems to me I've heard it before, but I can't place her. Who is she?"

"A very much talked-of woman here in Hollywood. I don't like her at all. She's only about

twenty-five, and has been divorced twice, I understand."

"Well, she'd better not be spreading any divorce microbes around our bungalow," Tom declared whimsically. "Wonder what she wants of you?"

"I don't know, but I have a fairly good idea. Mrs. Craven-Spitz is simply movie mad. She's in the worst stage of the disease. She might be given a chance as an extra, but she feels above anything like that. Because she has money, she thinks the star parts should be turned over to her. She's the worst pest on the lot."

Tom nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Do you think she has learned that you are directing Mr. Hammond's college picture and is after a part?"

"It wouldn't surprise me, although I don't see how she learned that I was to direct the picture. It was supposed to have been kept quiet until the work actually started."

"Can this Craven-Spitz woman act?"

"She's absolutely hopeless."

"Then why bother to see her?" Tom demanded practically. "Your time is valuable."

"I guess you're right. I don't want to see her, I'm sure."

Ruth turned toward the maid, but before she could issue an order to the effect that she would

not see the visitor, the words were checked on her lips. In the doorway of the living room, directly facing her, stood Mrs. Craven-Spitz. How much of the conversation she had heard, Ruth had no idea.

Mrs. Spitz maintained for an instant the theatrical pose she had assumed, then rushed forward with outstretched hands to greet Ruth.

"Ah—Ruth Fielding!" She gushed. "You have no idea how *dee-lighted* I am to welcome you back to our Hollywood colony."

Ruth did not return the greeting at once, but merely bowed her head in acknowledgment. She ignored the outstretched hands. In one quick appraising glance she had noticed that Mrs. Spitz was both overdressed and overpainted.

"You wish to see me on business?" Ruth asked politely, but in a tone not intended to encourage the woman.

If Mrs. Spitz felt that she was unwelcome, she chose to give no evidence of it. The smile she bestowed upon Ruth was saccharine-sweet.

"Yes, my deah. If you will be so kind as to spare me a few of your precious moments, I have something I must say to you."

"I seldom attend to matters of business in my home, Mrs. Craven-Spitz. If you will call at my office——"

"But, my deah, don't you understand? It's a matter of vital importance. Surely, you know

who I am—Mrs. Craven-Spitz of Edgewater Drive."

"I understood your name," Ruth said dryly. "What is it you have to say to me?"

"Really, it's a very private matter." Mrs. Spitz glanced significantly at Tom.

He would have declined to take the hint, had not a quick glance from Ruth told him that she considered it better that he humor the woman. With a last suspicious glance directed toward Mrs. Spitz' back, he excused himself and left the room.

Ruth politely offered Mrs. Spitz a chair, and waited impatiently for her to state her mission. As the woman again flashed her simpering smile, Ruth made up her mind that under no circumstance would she add her to the cast of her new picture.

"Undoubtedly, you have heard of my work in the films," Mrs. Spitz began. "The directors tell me that I am really wonderful."

"Indeed? Which directors?"

"Ah—well, let me see. Really, the names have slipped my mind. However, Mr. Hammond is especially interested in my future as a star. I came to see you about that this morning."

"Mr. Hammond!" Ruth could scarcely repress a smile, for she had known the president of the Alectrion Film Corporation too long to believe that he had temporarily lost his reason.

"I just came from his office," Mrs. Spitz rushed on. "He sent me to you. You are to cast me as the star of your college film."

Ruth swayed between annoyance and amusement. Not for an instant did she believe that Mr. Hammond had recommended Mrs. Spitz for a part in the picture. Even the minor parts were entirely unsuited to this woman's type, and Ruth had heard Mr. Hammond speak of her in uncomplimentary terms more than once.

"Did Mr. Hammond say you were to have a part?"

"Well, not in so many words, but that was the impression. He said that as a matter of form it would be necessary to get your official O.K."

Ruth, who by this time was positive that Mrs. Spitz was improvising tales as fast as she could think of them, arose from her chair, determined to end the unpleasant interview.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Craven-Spitz," she said, quietly but firmly. "I cannot use you. The principals of my company have already been selected."

"You can recast——"

"I have no desire to change the cast. I am satisfied with it."

"Then I suppose I must take a minor part." Mrs. Craven-Spitz dropped the affected tone of voice she had been using and snapped the words out crossly.

"Mrs. Craven-Spitz, you force me to tell you flatly that I will not use you in my picture, either as a star or as a minor character. Mr. Hammond has left the selection of the cast to me, and my decision is final."

Mrs. Craven-Spitz stared blankly at Ruth for an instant. Then she sprang to her feet, her face convulsed with anger.

"You can't insult me and get away with it, Ruth Fielding!" She cried, with flashing eyes.

With an effort, Ruth held her own temper in check.

"No one has insulted you," she returned coldly. "You deliberately intruded, and now I must ask you to leave."

The angry woman took a menacing step toward Ruth, but, as the latter stood her ground, unflinching, evidently decided that she could accomplish nothing by physical violence.

"You can't order me around," she fairly shouted. "You've been lucky so far, but I warn you your luck is at an end! Just because you won a scenario contest, you think you can run over everybody. But you can't run over me! I'll show you! You wait!"

Mrs. Spitz wheeled and flounced out of the room, slamming the door violently behind her.

CHAPTER II

A SECOND CALL

"For the love of Mike! what's going on in here, anyway?" Tom Cameron opened the living room door and glanced curiously about. "From outside, it sounded as though a whole menagerie had been turned loose."

"I don't wonder it sounded that way." Ruth, torn between laughter and tears, sank down upon the davenport. "Mrs. Spitz is a regular wildcat! In all my life I never met such a spiteful creature!"

"What did she say to you?" Tom strode across the room and gathered Ruth into his arms. "Why, you're trembling."

Ruth attempted to laugh.

"I guess I'm still angry, Tom. I'm all right otherwise. I'm not afraid of Mrs. Spitz."

"But what did she do?"

"Nothing at all, although I did think she was going to strike me. She came to ask for the star part in the college picture and when I told her I would not use her, she became violently angry and threatened me."

"Threatened you, did she?" Tom demanded grimly. "Well, I hate to pick a fight with a woman, but I won't let any one get away with that." He sprang to his feet and would have followed Mrs. Spitz had not Ruth placed a detaining hand on his sleeve.

"Don't stir her up again, Tom. She really isn't worth our notice."

"I didn't like the looks of that woman when she came here. Those affected manners of hers were enough to make a fellow sick! She'd better not come here again, that's all I've got to say!"

"I'll probably never hear from her again," Ruth said slowly. "Still, I can't help but have an uneasy feeling. If she were the sort of woman who fights openly, there would be nothing to worry about. But Mrs. Spitz is underhanded and mean. Unless I am mistaken, she will attempt to harm me."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Ruth." Tom patted his wife's shoulder comfortingly. "If Mrs. Spitz—or Mrs. Craven-Spitz, as she styles herself—tries to get funny, she'll find friend husband to reckon with! Remember, I'm your lawful protector now."

Ruth smiled, and determined to forget Mrs. Spitz and the threat she had made. Ruth was not afraid, for by nature she was a brave girl, and all her life she had been called upon to face trying situations.

Her early life had been anything but easy. As an orphan she had made her home with her great-uncle, Jabez Potter, the miserly owner of the Red Mill which was located near Cheslow in one of the New England states. There she had come to love Aunt Alvirah Boggs, her uncle's faithful housekeeper, and had grown up with Tom and Helen Cameron.

In time, Ruth found that she loved Tom Cameron too, and was induced to accept his ring. But Ruth's heart was also set on a writing career. In college she won fame as a scenario writer, and later Mr. Hammond had aided her in organizing her own film company. With Tom as the treasurer, the company had prospered beyond Ruth's wildest dream.

As a moving picture director, adventure carried Ruth and her friends to many strange lands, but always the plucky girl had been able to hold her own against unprincipled persons who sought to give her trouble. In fact, from the time the reader was first introduced to her in the initial volume of the series, "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill," she had proved her ability to think fast and clearly.

Ruth gained international honors by winning a prize scenario contest, and likewise enough money to make her independent. Her latest success however, had brought its aftermath of trouble, for as is recounted in the volume, "Ruth Fielding

at Cameron Hall," no sooner had she deposited the money in the bank than the institution was robbed.

When Tom Cameron mysteriously disappeared and was accused of the theft, Ruth took matters in her own hands and spared no expense or work in rounding up the gang of thieves. During the long weeks when she wondered if she would ever see Tom alive again, Ruth learned that she loved him more than anything else in the world.

So it was that, after Tom had recovered from a siege of sickness, a big wedding was held at the Red Mill. Although Ruth became Mrs. Cameron on that day, it was considered best that she remain "Miss Fielding," to the public that had learned to know her under that name.

Financially independent, Ruth had no need to return to the moving picture world. But love of the work had brought her back to Hollywood, under contract to produce a college film, "The Pride of Ardale."

It was this picture which now occupied Ruth's thoughts. As she glanced at the clock on the mantel, she gave an exclamation of surprise.

"It's nearly eleven o'clock, Tom! Mrs. Spitz upset me so, that I almost forgot that, beginning to-day, I'm a working woman again. I'm due at the studio in ten minutes. I wonder if I can make it?"

"I'll drive you down, Ruth." Tom hurried

away to the garage, leaving Ruth to gather her things together hastily.

At the lot, Ruth said good-bye to Tom, and then went inside the studio to begin the task of organizing the work for the picture that was to come. First, she turned her attention to the selection of minor characters. From the files, she selected a number of girls, including Cora Brown, an experienced actress whose work Ruth admired.

After she had gone over the files carefully, Ruth found that two of the minor parts remained unfilled.

"I'll go into the 'yard' and see what I can find," she decided.

The difficult task of choosing likely extras from the vast number of ambitious persons who gathered each morning at the studio was a tedious one, but Ruth never assigned it to an assistant. Some of her most promising stars had been recruited in this fashion.

As Ruth stepped into the "yard," the picturesqueness of the scene was not lost upon her, accustomed as she was to it. Pretty girls dressed in their best stood beside gray-haired actors whose hard faces explained their eagerness to get parts as extras. Mothers with babies which they were hoping would make future child stars, workmen, society women—they were all there.

As Ruth surveyed the group, every one turned

eyes upon her. The girls instinctively adjusted their hats and smiled. Ruth walked slowly down the line, occasionally pausing to ask a question. In selecting a girl for her company, Ruth never permitted beauty to sway her judgment. Pretty girls were abundant in Hollywood; real character was harder to find.

Presently, Ruth chose one girl and gave her a pass which would entitle her to a screen test. One more part remained to be filled, but as Ruth studied the faces before her, she found none that suited her. She had turned to leave the yard when her attention was attracted to a girl who stood somewhat apart from the others. It was not her face, but her actions that struck Ruth as odd.

Even as Ruth paused, she saw the girl stagger and start to fall. Quickly, Ruth ran to her. She caught her just in time to prevent her from slipping to the ground. The extras began to crowd about, but Ruth ordered them back.

"Thank you," the girl smiled faintly. "I'll be all right in a minute. Just weak—that's all."

"She needs a doctor," some one cried. "Send for a doctor."

"I don't want a doctor," the girl protested. "I'm all right."

"Unless I'm mistaken, what you need is food," Ruth said gently. "When was it that you last ate?"

"I—I can't remember. Several days ago."

"Then come with me," Ruth commanded, taking the girl by the arm and helping her walk.

At the studio cafeteria, Ruth nodded with satisfaction as the girl greedily ate the meal provided for her. Ruth listened to her story and found it much the same as the story of hundreds of other ambitious girls who came each year to Hollywood. Yet there was something a little different about this girl, Edith Calvin.

"Are you a college girl?" Ruth asked suddenly.

Edith Calvin nodded her head.

"I thought so. You look and act the part to perfection. How would you like a small part in a picture?"

"How would I like it?" the girl leaned forward eagerly. "Oh, how can I thank you?"

"Don't thank me," Ruth replied. "It's up to you to make good. Of course, you must have a screen test, but I feel certain you will photograph well."

After Ruth had shown Edith Calvin where she must go for the screen test, Ruth slowly made her way to Mr. Hammond's office. Now that her cast had been selected, there were important matters which must be discussed with the president of the Alectrion Film Corporation.

Ruth was admitted to the private office without

a moment's delay, and was greeted by Mr. Hammond in his usual cordial manner.

"Well, well, Ruth, it's good to see you back again. Just learned this morning that you were here."

"Who brought you the news?" Ruth asked pleasantly, although there was a definite purpose behind her question.

The smile left Hr. Hammond's face and he seemed a trifle ill at ease.

"Oh, some woman was in here this morning and just happened to mention it." While Mr. Hammond's tone was light, Ruth was not to be deceived.

"Mr. Hammond, please tell me. Was that woman Mrs. Craven-Spitz?"

Mr. Hammond hesitated, and then abruptly his manner changed and he adopted a confidential tone of voice.

"Yes, it was, Ruth. No pleasant visitor, either, I'll tell you."

"I don't doubt that Mrs. Spitz had some very complimentary things to say about me," Ruth observed sarcastically. "I had the doubtful honor of seeing her this morning."

"Indeed? She didn't mention that."

"Naturally. She told me you sent her to me."

"I sent her to you? No such thing! She came and asked me for a part in the college picture.

I told her you had the selection of the cast in your hands. I certainly did not suggest that she see you, as I knew you would not consider her seriously for a part."

"She behaved outrageously in my home this morning," Ruth declared. "But I guess one can't hold her responsible for her actions. I'm sure she doesn't deserve my thought."

"I'm not so sure of that, Ruth."

Ruth glanced up, startled at the expression in Mr. Hammond's eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. Do you know who Mrs. Spitz was before she married?"

"Why, no. Not really. I never went to the trouble of looking her up. She's already been divorced twice. Who was she before that?"

"Maggie Dover."

"Maggie Dover?" Ruth repeated, puzzled.

"Notorious. Always mixed up in shady deals, though nothing was ever proved against her. When she married a man by the name of Craven she acquired a shade of respectability, and when she married Spitz she acquired the money. She divorced them both. Since then she has apparently turned over a new leaf, but you can't be too sure."

"I wish you'd come right out and tell me what you mean," Ruth said impatiently, for she

realized that Mr. Hammond was trying to spare her feelings.

"All right, I will. She came here this morning with the deliberate intention of prejudicing me against you. She's a bad one, Ruth. You had better beware of her."

"I'm not afraid, but I'll keep my eyes open," Ruth assured him. "And now we'll forget Mrs. Spitz, and talk business."

But as they discussed plans for the big picture, it seemed to Ruth that Mr Hammond's mind was not entirely upon the conversation. Once or twice Ruth caught him staring at her rather oddly, and it gave her a strange, uneasy feeling.

"Foolish!" Ruth told herself, but she could not banish the feeling that Mr. Hammond was withholding something from her.

What was it that Mrs. Craven-Spitz had told him? Ruth could not bring herself to the point of asking, for, obviously, Mr. Hammond did not wish to tell her.

CHAPTER III

THE WORK BEGINS

THE next week was a busy one for Ruth Fielding, for now that her company was organized and actors were on the pay roll, delay counted heavily against the expense account. Tom good-naturedly grumbled that he never saw his wife, but as his own work kept him at the studio a great deal of the time, the complaint was unfounded. In the thrill of a work she loved, Ruth forgot Mrs. Craven-Spitz and the warning Mr. Hammond had given her.

Early on the morning set for the taking of the first interiors, Ruth and Tom were at the studio shortly after dawn. Tom helped Ruth attend to the thousand and one details that required attention.

All the actors had been ordered to be dressed promptly at eight-thirty, and upon the minute Ruth reviewed them to make certain that everything was as it should be. She found the make-up of one character too light; another too heavy. Back they both were sent to the dressing room.

Busy as she was, Ruth found time to speak

pleasantly to her friends and to Edith Calvin, the extra. It amused Ruth that the new girl did not understand how very fortunate she had been to secure a part in the picture. While it was true that Edith Calvin was suitable to the type she was to portray, there were probably a dozen other girls equally suitable and with more experience.

As the day was cloudy, artificial lights were turned on, for the glass top of the studio did not admit enough natural light. Ruth supervised the setting up of the cameras and marked out the lines within which the action must take place.

To a person unaccustomed to studio life, it would have perhaps seemed that Ruth Fielding did not always know what she was about, for everything was in confusion. As the rehearsals began, people were coming and going at all times. Actors chatted in groups as they awaited their call, stage hands, scene-painters and electricians moved about, yet every one knew his place and in no way interfered with the rehearsals. There were numerous delays before the photographing could begin, but never did Ruth Fielding become nervous or irritable.

The interiors were to be taken first and were to be shot from the middle of the story. The exteriors and the dangerous scenes were to be left until the last, for should one of the stars be hurt it might mean an indefinite delay.

At last Ruth, satisfied that all was ready, gave the word, and the cameras began to grind.

The work progressed slowly, but Ruth on the whole was pleased. Her actors threw themselves into their work. Fred Orman, cast for the first time in a dramatic rôle, had given Ruth a few moments of uneasiness, but almost immediately he found himself and demonstrated that he was capable of really good acting.

"Telegram for you, Miss Fielding."

During a lull between scenes, Ruth was approached by a messenger boy. As she accepted the yellow slip, Tom, who was near by, came over to her.

"Nothing the matter, I hope," he said anxiously. "Ever since I got that telegram saying my father was so near death, telegrams give me an uneasy sensation."

Without replying, Ruth hastily ripped open the envelope. The broad smile on her face assured Tom that everything was all right.

"It's from Helen. Here, you read it."

Tom accepted the sheet, and read:

"Can't stand it any longer. Am on my way to Hollywood. Father remains in perfect health.

"HELEN."

"Well, if that isn't just like the kid sister," and

Tom Cameron grinned as he handed back the telegram.

"It's only been four months since we were in Cheslow, but she's lonesome already," laughed Ruth. "Well, I'm longing for her, too. It seems ages since we had a good old talk-fest."

"I'm glad to know that father is getting along so well," Tom said soberly. "After his severe sickness, I was a little afraid he might have a setback. Now, that he is doing so well, there's no reason why Helen can't stay out here with us."

"I wonder when she will get here?"

"Search me! Helen is scandalously wasteful of words in a telegram, but she usually neglects to include the necessary information."

"Oh, well, we know she's coming so we can be on the lookout. I wonder what Chess will do?"

"Tag along, I'll bet. Chess can't bear to be away from Helen very long at a time. I'd be willing to stake almost anything, he'll be here in a few weeks after she arrives. Of course, he'll have an excuse."

"I hope he does come. It will seem like old times again."

"I don't think Chess is as full of fun as he used to be. He's getting too serious. I think our marriage sort of gave him the idea."

"He always had it," Ruth retorted. "Getting married shouldn't make a person feel serious.

Just look at us. We're positively giddy at times."

"Speak for yourself, please," Tom laughed.

"Well, to change the subject, what do you say to luncheon? I'm positively starved. I believe I could eat a fried board if I had one."

Tom and Ruth made their way to the lunch room and talked over the work of the morning as they ate their sandwiches and salad. Unconsciously, Ruth's eyes roved about the room, for she was ever on the lookout for new types and interesting faces.

Seen out of their natural surroundings, the actors would have seemed oddly grotesque, for many of them appeared in grease paint and freakish costumes. Cowboys sat side by side with women in evening gowns, and college girls lunched with men who were made up as slapstick comedians.

"Fred Orman did well this morning," Tom observed presently.

"He did," Ruth agreed enthusiastically. "From now on, he'll never need to worry about a job."

"That extra you picked up wasn't so bad, either, for an inexperienced actress. Cora Brown is coming right along, too."

"She's throwing herself into the part well. I like that girl, Tom. Unless I'm wrong, she has a future ahead of her."

"It's obvious she's patterning after you," Tom stated. "Any one with half an eye can see she worships the ground you walk on."

"Oh, Tom—you exaggerate."

"No, I don't. You know she thinks you're perfect."

"She has taken a fancy to me," Ruth admitted. "She tries to imitate me in so many ways. I don't mind; in fact, I'm a little flattered, but it is a responsibility. She works hard, and that's what makes an impression with me."

A glance at her watch warned Ruth that she must hurry back to finish taking the scenes allotted for that day. Tom, who had business in town, said good-bye, and left Ruth to her work.

As Ruth left the lunch room, she met Cora Brown face-to-face in the doorway.

"You did a fine piece of acting this morning," Ruth, warm smile on her lips, stopped to say.

Even before the girl replied, Ruth knew that something was the matter. She apparently was disturbed about a piece of paper she held in her hand, and, instinctively, she thrust the paper behind her when Ruth spoke.

Quick as the movement had been, Ruth had noted it. It struck her as strange, for Cora Brown was not the sort of girl to be engaged in questionable activities.

"Why, Miss Brown," she cried impulsively.

"Is something the matter? I hope you haven't received bad news, or anything like that!"

Cora Brown attempted to smile, and succeeded after a fashion.

"No, Miss Fielding. I—I wasn't expecting—That is, meeting you so suddenly, just startled me."

The girl moved uneasily from one foot to the other, and Ruth, in mercy, passed on without another word.

"How very odd," she told herself. "Cora Brown, of all people, acting like that! Why, she looked at me in such a peculiar way. Imagine my thinking she worshiped the ground I walk on! This certainly doesn't look that way."

The work of the afternoon began, and Ruth was soon engrossed. Mr. Hammond appeared later in the day to watch the work for half an hour and to offer a few constructive criticisms.

"It's going to be a great picture, Ruth," he stated. "Everything running smoothly?"

"Absolutely—so far." Ruth wondered at the question.

"Haven't heard from Mrs. Craven-Spitz?"

"I've been too busy to think of her."

"Well, I'm glad of that. Incidentally, I gave orders that she was not to be allowed on the lot."

Ruth was at a loss for a reply, so said nothing. Mr. Hammond was certainly taking Mrs.

Craven-Spitz seriously. There was no doubt of that.

The day dragged on. Ruth had little opportunity to observe Cora Brown, but once she saw the girl take a slip of paper from her pocket and read it.

"I can't understand it," Ruth told herself. "She's troubled about something, I feel sure."

At six o'clock Ruth left the studio. Tom had not taken the roadster, as he had known that she would need it to motor home. Ruth climbed into the car, started the engine, and was about to slip in the clutch when she caught sight of Cora Brown just leaving the studio. Frequently, Ruth had taken Cora home, for the girl was not fortunate enough to have a car of her own.

"Want a lift?" she called.

Cora glanced up, startled. Then she shook her head in the negative.

"Not to-night. I—I'm not going home just yet."

Ruth bit her lip. It was the first time in her recollection that any one had refused a ride in her car. It was considered a high honor for a director to offer an actor a ride home.

As her car shot away from the curb, the humor of the situation struck Ruth Fielding, and she laughed.

"I guess it's good for my conceit," she told herself.

CHAPTER IV

THE ANONYMOUS LETTER

"THE first scenes are ready, Miss Fielding. You may see them in the projection room at any time."

Ruth glanced up from the report she was filling out and nodded to the man who had just delivered the message.

"I'm busy now, but I'll come in a few minutes. I wonder how they are?"

"I haven't seen them, Miss Fielding, but I reckon they're good. Your pictures always are."

Ruth smiled at the compliment and turned back to her work. She had scarcely written a line when the door of her office opened a second time. She looked up in annoyance, but her face relaxed as she saw who the visitor was.

"Why, Tom, you're early! I didn't expect you for at least two hours."

"Well, I didn't intend to come down so early, but I changed my mind."

"Nothing special up, is there?" Ruth asked curiously, for Tom was not in the habit of interrupting her work.

"Oh, nothing special, I guess. I just wondered if you read the paper this morning?"

"I glanced over it, but these days the front page is about my limit. I haven't much time to read."

"Then you probably didn't see the item about the new film company."

"New film company!" Ruth exclaimed. "No, I didn't!"

"I thought you might be interested, so I brought the item down for you to see."

Tom took a folded newspaper from his pocket and handed it to Ruth, indicating a marked passage.

"Well, I should say I am interested." Ruth accepted the paper and quickly scanned the article. "It isn't every day that a new company tries to break into Hollywood."

"Strikes me the organization of the company has been kept mighty dark," Tom commented. "Mr. Hammond hasn't said anything to you about it, has he?"

"Not a word. He usually gets wind of new movements before they're well started, too. He'll be interested in this article, all right. Strange the newspapers should get the news first. I don't understand it. I wonder where the new studio will be located?"

"I haven't an idea. All I know about it, is what I've shown you."

"Well, I have a suspicion where it will be located," Ruth said musingly, more to herself than to Tom. "There's only one good location left in Hollywood, and I'll venture the new company has it's eye on that place."

"You refer to the place the Creighton Film Company used before they went on the rocks?"

Ruth nodded.

"It's a wonder to me that it hasn't been snapped up before this."

"The newspaper story isn't very complete, but I take it big money is backing the project, Ruth."

"It looks that way. Of course, we have nothing to fear in the way of competition from a small company. They soon pass out of existence. I wonder who this Rose Bower is?" Ruth again scanned the item. "Ever hear of her, Tom?"

"It's a new name to me."

Ruth arose from her desk and walked slowly to the window and back again, lost in thought. Then she turned to Tom with a decisive gesture.

"This new company may amount to nothing, Tom. Again, it may. At all events, I must be on the safe side and protect my own and Mr. Hammond's interests. I must find out everything there is to know about the Rose Bower Company."

"I think that's wise, Ruth."

"It won't do to investigate too openly," Ruth continued, "and I can't trust the task of securing

information to just any one. Tom, will it be asking too much of you, to get the information for me?"

"I'll be glad to try."

"Good! I must know the resources of the company, who this Rose Bower really is, and anything else you stumble upon. And the sooner I get the information the better I'll like it."

"I'm off this minute. I'll locate the reporter who wrote the story and see what he can tell me. If he'll give me a good tip, I'll have no trouble in running down the whole story. See you later, Ruth."

After the door had closed behind Tom, Ruth again settled down to the work before her, but found it difficult to concentrate. Presently, she finished the report and telephoned to Mr. Hammond that she was ready to see the scenes of "The Pride of Ardale" flashed upon the screen.

Together they went to the projection room and a few minutes later were reviewing the result of Ruth's first work on the big picture. The talented young producer viewed her work with a critical eye and found it good. Still, when Mr. Hammond ordered the scenes projected several times, she began to wonder if everything was to his satisfaction. However, as they left the projection room, he relieved her of all doubt on that score.

"Ruth, if the exteriors show up as well as these

interiors, it will be the biggest picture we've ever released! You're a born director, and no question about that. Are expenses mounting up pretty high?"

"No, I'm watching out for that," Ruth replied. She knew that Mr. Hammond would place no restriction upon her. "I think I may safely estimate that the cost will not be more than two dollars and twenty cents a foot."

"That's wonderful, Ruth. You're a born business woman as well as a director, I guess. I don't see how you do it."

"I didn't live at the Red Mill for nothing," Ruth chuckled. "Uncle Jabez preached economy until I believe I actually absorbed part of his philosophy."

"Well, you don't need to feel that you're being stinted on this picture. Within reason, I don't care how much you spend."

"I think I can turn out a good picture and keep within the figure I mentioned. Of course when we shoot the scenes in the mountains and at Catalina Island, expenses are bound to mount up fast, but I counted on that."

"When will you be ready to take the exteriors?"

"I can't say. It depends on how the work goes. Perhaps in a week, perhaps not for two. By the way, have you heard about the new film company just organized?"

Mr. Hammond expressed his surprise and Ruth quickly told him of the article in the morning paper. The president of the Alectrion Film Corporation showed his discomfiture.

"I don't see how I missed that. Hm, I wonder if they'll snap up the old Creighton studio?"

"It wouldn't surprise me, Mr. Hammond."

"Well, I don't see what we can do about it. The company will probably die a natural death after the first picture is released. I won't take any more of your time, because I know you're more than busy. Good-bye."

After Mr. Hammond had left her, Ruth walked slowly toward the costume room. She spent half an hour going over the array of gowns, selecting the ones she found suitable for the ballroom scene which was to be taken the following day. Although the stars furnished their own dresses, gowns for the minor characters and for the extras were given out from the storeroom.

At noon Ruth lunched on a sandwich at the studio cafeteria. She usually found that she was too busy to indulge in a heavy meal, and this day was no exception. As she arose to leave the dining room, she noticed Cora Brown sitting at a table in a far corner of the room. Ruth started to turn away, but upon impulse retraced her steps and went over to her table.

"I wanted to tell you to report an hour early

to-morrow morning," she said, using business as an excuse.

Cora Brown glanced up at Ruth, obviously ill at ease.

"All right, Miss Fielding, I'll be there," she replied.

"What can be the matter with that girl?" Ruth asked herself impatiently.

Aloud she said:

"I wish you would be quite frank with me, Miss Brown. Are you feeling able to work?"

"Yes, Miss Fielding."

Ruth sat down at the table, determined to get at the bottom of the trouble.

"Tell me what is troubling you," she urged in a low, kind voice.

The girl fastened eyes that were almost tragic upon Ruth.

"Oh, Miss Fielding, I can't!"

"Why not? I only want to help you."

"It isn't that. It's—it's about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, I've been so upset about a note I received the other day. I didn't want you to know about it."

"A note!" Ruth recalled the slip of paper she had seen Cora reading.

"Yes. Now that I've mentioned it, I suppose I had better show it to you. But let's go outside where we can't be heard."

Puzzled, Ruth followed Cora Brown from the cafeteria. Once outside, the girl took a crumpled piece of paper from her purse.

"I suppose I should have showed you this when it first came, but I didn't want to annoy you. Of course I don't believe a word of it!"

Ruth accepted the paper. One glance at it told her that it was an anonymous letter.

The note was brief, and read:

"This is to warn you that you endanger your name and future by associating with Ruth Fielding. She is a trickster and will soon be exposed. She did not write the prize scenario."

"Of course you know I don't believe a word of it!" Cora repeated for the second time. "Anonymous letters aren't worth paying attention to, anyway."

"I agree with you there," Ruth looked up from reading the letter, an angry gleam in her eyes. "If you don't mind, I'll destroy this."

"Certainly. If some folks should see it they might not understand."

"When did the letter reach you?"

"Three days ago in the mail."

"I haven't words to express my contempt of a person who would stoop to write such a letter," Ruth said bitterly. "Of course I do not need to tell you the accusation is false."

"It's ridiculous," Cora put in. "Of course I believe you wrote the scenario. I won't mention the letter to any one, and I'll think no more about it."

"It was probably written by some one who has a grudge against me," Ruth said slowly. "Possibly some one I have refused to engage."

"You have some one in mind?"

Ruth shook her head.

"No—I can't say I have. A woman in my position is bound to make enemies, but I know of no one in particular. The letter was purposely typewritten, so there is no handwriting to furnish a clue as to the identity of the writer. Oh, well, we'll forget about it. Don't forget to report an hour early to-morrow."

But Ruth did not forget the anonymous letter. It disturbed her more than she cared to admit.

After Cora had gone, she went directly to her office and reread the note, but could make nothing new of it. What could it mean? Was this letter the beginning of trouble?

"If Cora received a letter, it's likely similar letters have been sent to others," Ruth reasoned. "Every one may not take the matter as sensibly as she did. In that case—well, I must keep my eyes open for trouble."

CHAPTER V

RUTH BEGINS TO WORRY

"I SAY, Ruth, come to life! This is the second time I've asked you a question. I said, 'Would you like a second serving of potatoes?' "

Ruth, who had been unusually silent during the dinner hour, glanced up from her plate and smiled at Tom.

"I'm awfully sorry, Tommy. I didn't mean to crawl into my shell. I don't believe I want any potatoes. I don't seem to be very hungry tonight."

"I should say you don't," Tom commented, with a critical glance at her plate. "You've scarcely touched your food. Is the new picture proving to be too much for you?"

"Oh, no," Ruth hastened to assure him. "I love the work and everything is going along so smoothly."

"I don't want your enthusiasm to lead you to too much work," Tom declared, genuine concern in his voice.

"No danger of that. I'm not working hard enough to overdo."

"Well, something is the matter," Tom insisted stubbornly. "Something is bothering you. All evening you've been as silent as the Great Stone Face. You aren't worrying about this new film company that has started up?"

"Oh, that—" Ruth shrugged her shoulders. "I've scarcely thought of it since I talked to you this morning. By the way, what did you learn?"

"Not much. I rounded up the reporter who wrote the story and took him to luncheon. He told me everything he knew, but he didn't know any more than was given in the paper. However, he did give me a tip, and I believe I'll have better luck to-morrow in finding out who this Rose Bower really is."

"Oh, well, it's no killing matter, but I should like to know."

Ruth, who had no wish to trouble Tom with news of the disturbing letter she had read that afternoon, had introduced the subject of the new film company in the hope that she could change the conversation. Tom, however, was not to be put off the track.

He arose from the table and went over to Ruth and slipped his arm about her shoulders.

"What's the matter, Ruthie? Something has happened since I saw you this morning."

"I didn't want to worry you, Tom. After all it's really nothing to become alarmed about. Just an anonymous letter."

"Just!" Tom snorted. "Folks had better not send you anonymous letters or I'll——"

"The letter wasn't sent to me," Ruth said, and then quickly told the story and showed him the note Cora Brown had received.

"You can just bet I'll not let any one get away with anything as raw as this!" Tom exploded. "I'll show 'em they can't tell lies about my wife!"

"I'm afraid there's no way we can discover who wrote that letter, Tom."

"The letter doesn't give any clue, but I'll find out who wrote it if it's the last thing I do. The nerve of any one even suggesting that you didn't write the prize scenario!"

"You know I really wrote it, don't you, Tom?"

"I should rather guess I do! I'll never forget how you plugged away at it all one summer. You worked like a slave to finish it in time for the contest, and then had it stolen at the last minute."

"Of course I'm glad we recovered the scenario and that I won the prize with it," Ruth sighed. "But success certainly has its disadvantages as well as advantages. It makes you the target for so many blackmailers."

"This note doesn't sound like blackmail."

"No, it doesn't," Ruth admitted. "Frankly, it has me puzzled. I can make nothing of it."

"You forget all about it," Tom advised kindly. "Just turn the matter over to me."

"You're such a comfort, Tom," and Ruth

smiled gratefully. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

At the studio an hour early the following morning, Ruth had no time to think of anything save the work of the moment. If everything went well she hoped to complete the interiors in a week.

However, things did not go well. The rehearsals went badly from the start, and Ruth, who was determined that only the best would do, did not give the word to the cameramen until the scenes had been gone over time after time.

It seemed to Ruth that the actors and actresses did not throw themselves into their parts as well as usual. When she chided them, she thought they did not take the criticism in the light she had intended it.

"Perhaps I'm imagining it," she told herself. "I've been working them pretty hard this morning. They will do better when the cameras are grinding."

Such was not the case. Ruth was forced to cut a scene before it was half finished. The entire film was discarded.

"This will never do," Ruth thought. "I'll give them a rest."

Accordingly, she issued orders that there would be a fifteen-minute rest and turned her attention to other matters. The actors walked away, chatting in little groups.

A few minutes later as she was talking to one of the electricians about changes in the lighting, her eyes took in the fact that she was undergoing close scrutiny by a group of extras. Ruth, without appearing to notice, went on talking to the electrician, but her mind was not entirely upon what she was saying. There was no question but that she was under discussion by the group. One of the extras was pointing her out to the others.

This in itself was not unusual, for Ruth Fielding was the only woman director at the studio, and the honor was a high one. She would have thought nothing of it had she not noticed the peculiar expressions upon the faces. Then, too, she recognized two of the extras as belonging to her own cast, and, of course, she was known to them.

"I wonder if that anonymous letter has been spread around?" Ruth asked herself.

She knew of no way to find out, but the opportunity was given her sooner than she expected.

She walked over to one of the sets to examine the scenery which had just been erected. As she paused, she heard voices on the other side of the set. Ruth had no mind to eavesdrop, but it was impossible not to hear.

"If it's true, Ruth Fielding is certainly due for a big flop."

"I'll sure be sorry for her. She always seemed so nice."

Although Ruth Fielding was in such a position that she could not see who the speakers were, the voices came to her ears clearly. There was no doubt in her mind as to the meaning of what she had heard. They were referring to the prize scenario and were taking it for granted that she had not written it herself.

Unquestionably, the writer of the anonymous letter had done his work well.

"It isn't fair!" Ruth told herself angrily. "I'll confront them and tell them it isn't true!"

A moment's thought, however, convinced Ruth that this course would not be wise. She had no way of proving that she had written the scenario. To confront these two actors would only put a worse face on the matter. For the time being, the only thing to do was to ignore it.

This, she soon found, was not easy to do. She had hoped that a brief recess would refresh her actors and make them more eager to work. Instead, it seemed to her that they came back more reluctant than before.

"The morning will be a total loss," Ruth fretted.

One actress in particular who had only a small part gave Ruth a great deal of trouble.

"Miss Hadley, it seems to me you aren't trying very hard," Ruth said, a trifle tartly. "You are holding up everything."

Miss Hadley shrugged her shoulders and

stared at Ruth rather insolently, although she did not dare to make a retort.

Ruth bit her lip, for she understood perfectly. She had lost the respect of many of the members of the cast. It was true that Fred Orman and a number of the actors who had been with her for a period of time were doing their best to make the morning's work run smoothly, but it was nevertheless clear that many were willing to believe the worst.

In desperation Ruth announced that there would be no more work that morning. She knew that it was impossible to carry on in the face of such an attitude on the part of her company. Always, Ruth had been proud that her actors liked to work under her direction. Now, the morale of the entire company was endangered.

Ruth herself was in a frame of mind not conducive to good work. She could no longer ignore the anonymous letter. It had forced itself to her attention, most cruelly.

"My reputation is at stake," Ruth thought bitterly. "I have worked so hard to win a name for myself—a name that is honorable. And now, in one underhanded blow, I lose it."

Only for a moment was Ruth broken and discouraged. She had faced trouble before, and her trials had made her strong. Now she straightened her shoulders and made herself a promise.

"I'll clear my name! With the help of my

friends, I'll run down this anonymous letter! Oh, if only my friends stick by me!"

As Ruth slowly made her way back to her private office, she considered the problem which lay before her. It would be no easy task to discover the writer of the anonymous letter, that she knew.

If only this enemy would fight fairly! But that was too much to expect. Rumor, Ruth realized, was the hardest thing in the world to combat. She had been up against trouble before, but never trouble of this nature. If only she could gain a clue! As it was, she was almost helpless. Where would the hidden enemy strike next?

Ruth's thoughts were interrupted at this point, for the door of her office was suddenly thrust open.

"Tom!" Ruth cried out in joy, and ran to him.

"Why, what's the matter, Ruthie? Brace up, I have news for you."

"News," Ruth repeated weakly. "If it's any more trouble, I don't want to hear it. I've had enough for one day."

"This is something you ought to know, Ruth," Tom said soberly. "I've found out who is promoting the Rose Bower Film Company."

CHAPTER VI

AN ACCIDENT

"TELL me quick, Tom! What have you learned about the Rose Bower Company?" Eagerly, Ruth asked the question.

Tom's announcement that he had unearthed valuable information concerning the new film company which had so unceremoniously invaded Hollywood, temporarily drove Ruth's trouble from her mind.

"Not as much as I intend to learn, but enough to give us cause for worry, all right."

"Don't keep me in suspense, Tom! Did you find out who this Rose Bower really is?"

"Yes, I did. And you know her, all right. Rose Bower is none other than Mrs. Craven-Spitz."

"What?"

"Surest thing, Ruth. Masquerading under an assumed name."

"But it's ridiculous! You must be joking."

"Never was more serious in my life."

"Surely, she can't be planning on actually directing a picture."

"As far as I can learn, she is."

"How can she hope to succeed when men with experience have failed? Mrs. Spitz doesn't know the first principle of directing a picture."

"She has money, though, and that will tide her over some of the rough spots."

"Her money won't carry her far. It can only be a matter of time until she fails."

"She's sinking a pile into this venture," Tom informed his wife.

"Has she any backers?"

"I couldn't learn that. But I judge it's mostly her own money that is going into the company."

"How did you find out all this?" Ruth questioned curiously.

"Well, I went back and talked to that newspaper reporter again. He gave me a description of Rose Bower and it tallied so perfectly with Craven-Spitz that I was suspicious right off the reel. I thought I'd try to find out for sure, so I got Mrs. Spitz's telephone number and called her residence."

Ruth nodded her head in satisfaction.

"You always were resourceful, Tom."

"That was just common sense. When she answered, I told her I wanted to speak to Rose Bower. She hesitated a minute and then said: 'This is she speaking.' Then I hung up on her."

"It's a wonder we didn't connect her name with

the company in the first place. She's wild to get into the movies."

"Of course you'll have nothing to fear in the way of rivalry," Tom commented. "When her first picture is released, she'll be through."

"Yes. But in the meantime, she may try to do me damage."

Tom looked troubled.

"I'll admit it does look as though she was motivated by spite when she organized that company."

"Yes, she deliberately went to Mr. Hammond and told him—" Ruth broke off suddenly.

"Told him what?"

Ruth did not reply for a moment, and when she did her voice was tense.

"Tom, I don't know what she told Mr. Hammond; but I suspect it was something that had to do with the prize scenario!"

"You think——"

"That it was Mrs. Craven-Spitz who wrote the anonymous letter," Ruth finished quickly. "I intend to ask Mr. Hammond pointblank what it was Mrs. Spitz said about me. If she told him I used material other than my own in the prize scenario, I'll feel certain Mrs. Spitz was the one who wrote the anonymous letters."

"Letters!" Tom caught her up. "I thought there was only one."

"I feel certain there have been several. To-day, I overheard two extras talking about me—saying I was 'due for a flop.' "

"Don't pay any attention."

"But some of the actors and actresses of my own company acted strangely. I believe every one on the lot will know about that letter before the day is over." Ruth dropped her head down upon her arms, near tears.

"It can't be as bad as you think." Tom went to her and put his arms around her. "Just now everything seems to pile down on you, but you'll have better luck to-morrow. Brace up! Now that we suspect it was Mrs. Spitz who wrote the letters, we'll battle her together."

Ruth raised her head and flashed her old courageous smile.

"Yes, Tom, and we'll win, too! Mrs. Spitz is nothing but a spiteful cat. I'm not afraid that I can't cope with her, given half a chance. I didn't mean to act in such a silly fashion. It's just that it makes me feel so blue to think people are so willing to believe evil of me."

"Not your real friends, Ruth. You have many of them, and I know they'll stick. Then the old members of your company won't go back on you."

"No, I feel I can depend on most of them. I'm a little afraid of Miss Hadley though, and of course I'm not sure of the new actors."

"This is bound to blow over in a day or so, Ruth."

"I doubt it, Tom. I feel I must expose the writer of the anonymous letter, or I will always be under suspicion."

"You're too busy with your picture to worry yourself with that, Ruth," Tom said resolutely. "Turn that letter over to me, and I'll see if it's possible to prove who wrote it."

"But it's typewritten."

"Typewriters have individuality, the same as handwriting. I'll take it to an expert, and he'll be able to tell me what make of machine printed it. That may furnish a clue."

"I was going to destroy it, but I'll be glad to turn it over to you if you want it." Ruth unlocked a drawer of her desk and removed the anonymous letter, handing it to Tom.

The next day Ruth was gratified to find that Tom had been right when he had declared that her friends would stand by her. Fred Orman was the first to come to her office to tell her that he knew she had been the victim of a cruel plot and to offer aid in running down the writer of the anonymous letters. Others came, too, and Ruth received them gratefully.

Yet it was impossible to ignore the aloof attitude of some of her associates. Clearly, unless she found a way to prove conclusively that she was the authoress of the prize scenario,

there would always be a dark blot on her name.

Outwardly, Ruth gave no indication that she was troubled. Megaphone in hand, she directed the various scenes as well as though she were not harassed by a multitude of worries. Fred Orman and the other actors who had been with Ruth for a number of years, realized that she was working under a strain, and did their best to help her. Miss Hadley and some of the newer ones were not as thoughtful, and by their very attitude made it clear that they had accepted the anonymous letter as true.

When Ruth was not actually directing a picture, she tried to keep to her office as much as possible, for it was becoming exceedingly unpleasant to find herself pointed out wherever she went. Rather than face the knowing glances of those who condemned her without a fair consideration of the facts, she decided to take her meals in her private office instead of the studio cafeteria.

Ruth did not tell Tom that she was no longer lunching in the cafeteria, for she knew it would only worry him. Tom, who spent the greater part of his spare time trying to find clues which would lead to the identity of the writer of the anonymous letter, had no idea that matters had continued to grow worse at the studio.

"I wonder if Mr. Hammond knows about it?" Ruth thought one day, as she ate a lonely meal in

her office. "I must bring myself to the point of asking him. If he doubts me, I couldn't go on directing the picture. I wish Helen would get here. I would talk the matter over with her."

Her mind again on the unpleasant situation in which she found herself, Ruth could not finish her luncheon. She pushed aside the tray with an impatient gesture and shoved back her chair. She walked over to the window and looked out upon the expanse of studio.

A few days before she had been thrilled at the thought of again being a part of the moving picture colony. Now she found that each day brought new worries, more trouble.

"I can't go on like this," Ruth half whispered. "I can't!"

Ruth's thoughts ended at this point. Without warning, something happened that gave her no time to think or to save herself from possible injury.

There was a blinding flash of light at the far end of the studio. Simultaneously, came a deafening roar and a terrific jar that broke the windows and sent Ruth reeling backward.

CHAPTER VII

THE EXPLOSION

RUTH started back in horror and gripped the edge of her desk for support as the window glass crashed at her feet. Only a miracle saved her from being severely cut by the flying pieces.

What had happened? For a moment Ruth could not think. Then her mind cleared and she was again calm and cool. There had been a terrible explosion, that she knew. Where it had originated and how badly the studio was damaged, she must find out.

Quickly, she thrust her head out of the window and looked out. Already red flames were shooting up from the far side of the studio. Everything was in confusion. People were running in every direction, making for the exits and crying out in fright.

"The explosion must have occurred in the laboratory," Ruth reasoned. "It will take quick work to get every one out and save the studio!"

To think was to act with Ruth Fielding. She stepped through the window and, with her hands, swung herself from the ledge to the ground be-

low. Running as rapidly as she could, she made straight toward the laboratory.

The studio was in confusion. Every one was thinking of his own safety and disregarding his fellow actors. Ruth knew she must gain command quickly, if the studio and the lives of those endangered were to be saved.

"Stop!" she shouted. "Don't run away like cowards! Help me man the fire extinguishers!"

Ruth was a born leader, and at a time like this she knew no fear. In the face of danger she was always calm and cool.

"Quick!" Ruth pointed out a rubber hose maintained for just such an emergency as this. "Attach it!"

The explosion had shattered some of the glass top of the studio, but fortunately no one had been seriously hurt by the falling glass. The laboratory was a flaming furnace, and the fire was spreading rapidly.

Ruth knew there were six laboratory workers and she tried to check them off to make sure that no one remained inside, but found it impossible.

"There's only one way to find out!" Ruth cried. "And that's to go inside."

Fred Orman volunteered instantly. Another actor, equally courageous, also offered.

Their clothing soaked with water, Fred Orman and the other actor dashed through the doorway of the laboratory into the flames. Ruth held her

breath for what seemed an interminable length of time.

Then the two men appeared, staggering under the weight of a body. Women screamed and turned away. Not so Ruth, for she had served as a Red Cross nurse during the World War and had schooled herself to just such things.

She rushed forward to help Orman and his companion.

"Every one's out now," Orman gasped, for the smoke had nearly overpowered him. "This fellow is unconscious. We found him on the floor."

A hasty examination told Ruth that while the man had been overcome by the smoke, he was not severely burned.

"He'll come through all right," she said in relief. "Some one call the ambulance."

Satisfied that the laboratory workers were all safe, Ruth now turned her attention to organizing the fire fighters. Although a call had been turned in for the fire department, immediate action was necessary if the studio were to be saved.

Under Ruth's direction the fire extinguishers were put to use, and the chemicals were soon squirting into the leaping flames. So intent was Ruth upon the task of controlling the laboratory fire that she had given little thought to the dressing rooms near by.

There had been no immediate danger in this vicinity, and ample time had elapsed for all actors and actresses to escape. But in spite of everything Ruth and her helpers could do, the fire spread, and soon the dressing room nearest the laboratory was in flames.

"Oh, why don't the firemen come?" Ruth fretted. "We haven't one half enough equipment!"

"Miss Fielding! Oh, Miss Fielding! Save them!"

Startled at the cry which broke upon her ears, Ruth turned and saw Cora Brown running toward her.

"Save whom?" Ruth demanded. "Every one is safe, Cora."

"Oh, no!" Cora half moaned. "Four of the girls are trapped in the dressing room! Edith Calvin and three others. They went back to get their things."

Ruth turned horror-stricken eyes toward the dressing room. If the four girls were inside, they were unquestionably trapped. There was only one exit, and the flames had made it impossible to use it.

Fred Orman, who had overheard, looked grimly at the flame enveloped dressing room and then turned bravely to Ruth.

"I'll try it!"

Ruth shook her head decisively.

"No, it would be crazy to try! There isn't a chance that you can make it."

"But we can't let them burn to death!"

"There must be some other way," Ruth reasoned with herself. "Ah, I have it! A ladder!"

Without wasting time or asking what plan Ruth intended to follow, Orman dashed away to find a ladder. Ruth's plan was a daring one, and she was not certain it could be successfully carried through, but at least it was better to try it than to do nothing, she told herself.

Her quick eye had detected a skylight in the top covering of the dressing room. Her plan was to mount to the roof, break the skylight, and by means of a rope, haul the girls to safety.

Minutes counted. To find a rope was not easy, but Ruth had discovered one by the time Fred Orman had placed a ladder against the side of the dressing room. He quickly scrambled up the ladder, and Ruth, in spite of the protests, followed him with a rope.

"Go back!" Orman cried. "This roof isn't safe."

Ruth grimly shook her head and stepped from the ladder upon the roof. Realizing that he was only wasting words, Orman quickly relieved Ruth of the rope.

It required but an instant to reach the skylight and smash it. The smoke poured up into the rescuers' faces, forcing them back. After the

first dense cloud had rolled up, Ruth and Orman tried to peer down through the skylight, but they could make out nothing below.

"Dangle the rope down through the skylight!" Ruth commanded.

Orman obeyed, unwinding the rope until he was certain it had struck the floor of the dressing room below.

"I can't see anything!" Ruth cried, "but I heard a scream!"

"Some one has hold of the rope!" Orman emitted hoarsely.

Together, Ruth and Orman began to pull on the rope. It was no easy task to lift the first girl to the level of the skylight where she could help herself, but it was accomplished. The rope was lowered a second time, without a moment's loss of time. The girl who had been rescued, was brave enough to remain on the roof to help lift the second girl to safety.

By this time the crowd that had congregated below had become alarmed for the safety of those on the roof, and cries of fear went up. A number of men would have helped Ruth and Orman, but Ruth waved them back, for she realized that the roof was in a weakened condition, and would scarcely support additional weight.

The heat was almost unbearable, and the smoke was so dense that Ruth found it difficult to breathe. As the rope was lowered for the

third time, Ruth ordered the two girls who had been rescued to leave the roof, but she refused to abandon her post when Orman suggested that she, too, go.

The third girl was brought through the skylight, nearly overcome by the heat and thick smoke. Ruth supported her, and helped her to the ladder where willing workers received her and carried her to safety.

Orman had lowered the rope for the fourth time, and Ruth rushed back to help him. Only one girl, Edith Calvin, remained in the dressing room. It seemed almost suicide to remain longer on the roof, but Ruth and Orman were game. They disregarded the warning shouts from below, and worked furiously against time.

Never had seconds seemed so long to Ruth. Her strength was going fast, and she wondered if she could hold the rope until Edith Calvin reached the safety of the roof.

Then, Orman grasped Edith Calvin's arm and dragged her through the opening. She could not stand alone, and Ruth and Orman held her up, and practically carried her to the ladder.

Smoke was pouring up all around the three. Ruth was coughing and choking, and it seemed to her that she would surely suffocate before safety was reached.

Edith Calvin was first helped to safety, then Ruth quickly scrambled down the ladder, fol-

lowed by Orman. There was no time to remove the ladder from the side of the building. The three had no sooner reached the ground and stepped back, than the roof crashed.

"Whew!" Fred Orman mopped his forehead. "That was a narrow escape!"

Ruth gave him a shaky smile. While others attended to the four girls who had been rescued, she sank down on a pile of lumber and tried to rest. The firemen, just arriving on the scene, relieved her of further responsibility.

"Ruth, are you hurt? I dashed out from the city the minute I heard of the accident!" Tom Cameron, his voice tense with excitement and concern, had reached the studio in time to witness the falling of the roof.

"I'm all right, Tom. Just tired." Ruth slipped gratefully into his warm embrace. "It took all of my strength to help lift those girls to the roof."

"You might have been killed," Tom said tenderly.

"We couldn't let those girls burn to death, and it was impossible to save them without taking a risk. Foolish girls. They went back to the dressing room and were trying to pack their handbags."

"The fire is under control now, so we may as well go to your office, or some place where you can rest and clean up."

"Clean up?" Ruth smiled for the first time. "I suppose I'm streaked with black."

"You wouldn't make a good advertisement for the schoolgirl complexion," Tom admitted.

Arm in arm, they moved away, but before they reached Ruth's office they met Mr. Hammond. He, too, had been absent from the studio at the time of the explosion and had hurried back, to arrive after the danger was over. He had been told of Ruth's daring work, and how she had saved the studio and the lives of the four girls.

"Ruth, this places me more than ever in your debt," he stated. "You saved the studio."

"It doesn't look as though I saved much." Ruth glanced ruefully about her.

"It's insured, of course. But that won't help us now. It will take at least two or three weeks to repair it so that we can use it."

"And our actors are drawing pay whether they work or not," Ruth added. "We can't afford to delay work on the picture. It must go on!"

"But how? It's obvious we can't work if we have no studio. I wish you'd tell me, Ruth, how we can go on!"

CHAPTER VIII

A BUSINESS TRANSACTION

How would it be possible to go on with the big picture? For the half-hour that Ruth had utilized all her energy fighting the flames that endangered the studio she had given no thought to the future.

Now the question that Mr. Hammond had voiced brought her to a full realization of the situation that confronted them. "The Pride of Ardale" must be completed and released on schedule time, or the Alectrion Film Corporation would lose considerable money. How this could be accomplished, Ruth did not know.

Even a casual examination of the interior of the studio made it evident that it would take weeks, perhaps months, for the necessary repairs to be made. A great deal of glass had been broken, the laboratory and dressing rooms had been burned, and important equipment, including scenery, had been ruined.

"It looks rather hopeless," Mr. Hammond said, after he and Ruth and Tom had made the round of inspection.

"How about shooting the exteriors next?" Tom suggested. "The script calls for scenes at a college, in the mountains, and on the water, doesn't it?"

"I suppose that's all we can do." Mr. Hammond frowned as though the plan did not appeal to him. "It's really putting the cart before the horse. I always like to take the interiors first. What do you say, Ruth?"

"I feel the same way about it. We should leave the dangerous scenes until the last. Otherwise we risk an even greater delay. Should one of the actors be injured it would hold up the entire picture. No, I don't think we should take the exteriors until the interiors are finished."

For a few minutes nothing more was said, and the three stood lost in thought.

Suddenly Ruth looked up, her eyes bright.

"How stupid of me that I didn't think of it before!"

"Think of what?" Tom demanded eagerly.

"Why, the Creighton studio!"

Mr. Hammond's face brightened.

"It's in a good location."

"The best ever," Ruth reinforced. "It's well planned, too, and the lighting is excellent. In fact, I'm frank to say, I believe it's the equal of this studio."

"We must lose no time in renting it," Mr. Hammond said enthusiastically. "If we can get

it, there's no need of more than a day's delay in the filming of the picture."

"Who owns the studio?" Tom asked practically.

"It passed into receivership when the Creighton company failed," Mr. Hammond explained. "It was put up for sale at a time when money was tight here in California, and went for a song. A man by the name of John Gordon owns it now, I believe."

"Then we must see him at once," Ruth said briskly.

"I wonder if you'd care to take that on your hands, Ruth?" Mr. Hammond questioned. "I'll be more than busy the next few days with arrangements for remodeling this place."

"I'll be glad to do it, if you think me capable," Ruth said modestly. "How high are you willing to go?"

"We must have that studio at any cost—that is, anything within reason. Use your own judgment. I'll trust the matter entirely to you."

"It's too late to see Mr. Gordon to-day, I suppose. Will to-morrow morning be soon enough, do you think?"

"Oh, yes," Mr. Hammond answered. "That studio has been vacant for over six months now. No great rush, although we want to get it as soon as possible."

"Then I'll see Mr. Gordon in his office the first thing in the morning," Ruth promised.

"That will relieve me of a worry," Mr. Hammond said in relief. "I'll leave it all to you. There's been just one bit of luck," he added, as he turned away. "Though much of our scenery was destroyed and many costumes ruined, the pieces we were using for this film were, for the most part, out of the track of the fire."

"Ruth, I think you had better go home and get a good rest," Tom advised kindly, when they were alone. "You've gone through an ordeal."

"I have that," Ruth admitted, with a wan smile. "I'm tired enough to drop. I can't leave the studio though until I make certain the laboratory assistant wasn't badly hurt, and of course I must check over the sets to find out how much new equipment we will need to go on with the picture. I'll feel better as soon as I wash off this coat of soot I acquired."

It was long after six o'clock when at last Tom persuaded Ruth to believe she had done all that she could that day. When they reached the bungalow, Ruth was so tired she scarcely touched her food, and it seemed to Tom that she was rather discouraged.

"It's been an unfortunate week all around," Ruth said thoughtfully.

"It was lucky the studio wasn't damaged beyond repair," Tom reminded her optimistically.

"And it was fortunate the laboratory assistant wasn't badly burned."

Ruth nodded.

"Those girls had a narrow escape, too. I suppose I should feel thankful things aren't any worse than they are."

"Do they know how the fire started?" Tom asked, for he had not heard all of the details of the explosion. "You don't suppose some one deliberately——"

"No, the laboratory assistant took all the blame. He was rather green and didn't know as much as he should about the proper handling of chemicals."

"I wonder if Mrs. Spitz has heard of the accident?" Tom mused.

"I was asking myself that very question, Tom. Of course she knows by this time. She's probably having a private jubilee."

"That old cat would, all right!"

Ruth smiled.

"She isn't so very old, Tom. Only twenty-five, they say."

"Twenty-five nothing! She probably hasn't had a birthday in the last ten years!"

The smile had faded from Ruth's face and she was no longer listening to what Tom was saying. Tom, noticing her preoccupation, ceased talking, and waited.

"Tom!"

"Yes?"

"I've just had a terrible thought. What if Mrs. Spitz should try to get that Creighton studio?"

"Jove, we have been stupid! That's the very thing she will try to do."

"And now when she hears our studio has been damaged, she'll allow no grass to grow under her feet."

"Nothing would delight her more than to squeeze the Alectrion Film Corporation out."

"Well, she won't do it, if I can prevent it!" Ruth arose from her chair, an expression of grim determination upon her face. "What time is it?"

"Nearly eight o'clock."

"We must see Mr. Gordon at once at his home."

"But you're so tired, Ruth."

"I can't think of that when so much is at stake, Tom. Will you go with me?"

"Of course. I'll have the car out in a jiffy."

As the roadster sped along the brightly lighted streets of Hollywood, Ruth more than once glanced nervously at her watch. Tom Cameron was an excellent driver, and they lost little time at the intersections. Ruth, who had looked up the number in the telephone book, maintained a sharp lookout for the house.

There was no mistaking it, for it was a large mansion located in the best section of Holly-

wood, not far from where Ruth and Tom lived. Presently the roadster rolled up the driveway and came to a standstill in front of the house. Tom helped Ruth from the car, and they hurried up the steps and rang the doorbell.

It was opened almost immediately by a liveried servant. In answer to Tom's request that they be permitted to see Mr. Gordon, the servant shook his head.

"Mr. Gordon is not seeing guests this evening, sir."

"Nevertheless, tell him that Miss Fielding wishes to speak with him," Ruth insisted.

A moment later the servant returned, and his manner had undergone a sudden change. He indicated that Ruth and Tom were to follow him.

"This way, please. Mr. Gordon will see you."

Tom and Ruth followed the butler to the drawing room and were announced. Mr. Gordon had never met Ruth, but of course knew her by reputation, as did nearly every one in Hollywood. He greeted Tom and Ruth cordially and indicated that they were to take seats.

"I must apologize for troubling you at this hour," Ruth began, and plunged into the story of the day's fire.

"So you want to rent my studio?" Mr. Gordon mused thoughtfully, when she had stated her business. "Well, I don't mind telling you an-

other person has negotiated for the studio, too."

"Mrs. Craven-Spitz?"

"Well, I don't wish to divulge the name of the person, but since you have guessed——"

"Mrs. Craven-Spitz hasn't rented it yet?" Ruth cut in.

"No," Mr. Gordon admitted. "The transaction has not been completed. I gave her an option."

"An option!" Ruth's heart sank, for she had no doubt that Mrs. Spitz would avail herself of this right to claim the studio. "When does it expire?"

"To-night at nine o'clock."

Ruth glanced at her watch.

"That's only twenty minutes."

"I am expecting Mrs. Spitz at any moment. If for any reason she fails to come, I shall of course be pleased to make terms with you. As it is, I am sorry I cannot accommodate you. An option is binding by law of course."

"If you don't mind, we will wait," Ruth said quietly.

A few minutes' chat on things in general was followed by a business talk and an agreement was reached as to what the terms would be for the studio in case Mrs. Spitz did not take up her option.

"You agree that if Mrs. Spitz is not here by nine o'clock, you will consider our deal closed, do

you?" asked Ruth toward the end of this talk.

"Absolutely. But I feel certain Mrs. Spitz will come."

Ruth, too, felt certain; but as long as a chance remained she would not allow it to slip by.

As Tom and Ruth waited, it seemed that time had never passed so slowly before. The hands of the clock on the mantel barely moved. At five minutes to nine, Ruth and Tom exchanged hopeful glances. If only Mrs. Spitz would fail to come before the option expired! It seemed too much to hope.

"Well, it looks as though she isn't coming," Mr. Gordon observed.

A silence fell over the three as the clock began to strike nine. On the last stroke, Mr. Gordon got up and walked over to his desk. Ruth breathed a deep sigh of relief, but her joy was short lived.

At that moment the butler entered the room and directed himself to Mr. Gordon.

"Mrs. Craven-Spitz to see you, sir."

CHAPTER IX

A THREAT

As THE servant announced that Mrs. Craven-Spitz had arrived, Mr. Gordon, pen in hand, looked at the clock and hesitated. He glanced at Ruth in perplexity.

What would he do? Ruth and Tom waited anxiously for his verdict.

"The option expired at nine o'clock," Ruth reminded him quietly.

Mr. Gordon hesitated a moment longer, then dipped his pen in the ink.

"I gave you my promise, Miss Fielding, and I will stand by it. The Creighton studio is yours at the figure you mentioned. I will sign the receipt now if you will make out a check for the first month's rent."

Ruth quickly complied with the request and accepted the slip of paper Mr. Gordon had signed. Tom, who had been anxiously watching the door, could scarcely conceal his satisfaction.

"This will bind the deal," Mr. Gordon said. "We can arrange the details of the agreement to-morrow."

"What shall I say to Mrs. Craven-Spitz, sir?" The butler reminded Mr. Gordon of the unpleasant interview which awaited him.

"Show her in. I may as well see her now and get the unpleasant matter over with."

"We will leave at once," Ruth declared, for she had no wish to encounter Mrs. Spitz.

Tom and Ruth turned to leave, but before they could cross the drawing room Mrs. Spitz appeared. She saw them and halted in the doorway to stare haughtily. Ruth would have ignored her and passed on, but Mrs. Spitz deliberately blocked the way.

"Mr. Gordon, I came to rent the studio," she said crisply. "I have your promise—the option."

"I am sorry, madam. The option expired at nine o'clock." Mr. Gordon's tone did not indicate that he was regretful.

"What?"

"I waited. You did not appear."

"You can't cheat me out of my rights that easily," Mrs. Spitz stormed. "I was delayed by traffic."

"That is no fault of mine, madam."

"I'll have the matter brought to court!" Mrs. Spitz cried angrily.

"As you like." Mr. Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "You will find you have no case."

Seeing that she could gain nothing from Mr. Gordon, Mrs. Spitz turned furiously upon Ruth.

"This is your work," she accused. "You have rented the studio!"

"Yes, I have!" Ruth retorted, with a cool smile.

"You good-for-nothing upstart!" Mrs. Spitz' eyes flashed fire. "You can't get by with this. I am going to expose you!"

"What do you mean? Expose me?" Ruth demanded indignantly.

"You'll soon see what I mean."

"It will have to be soon, or I will have you arrested for slander," Ruth retorted.

"Mrs. Craven-Spitz," Mr. Gordon interrupted coldly, "you will kindly not insult my guests. James, please open the door for Mrs. Craven-Spitz."

Realizing that she had only succeeded in creating a bad impression, Mrs. Spitz, with a last angry glare at Ruth, turned on her heel and departed. As soon as Ruth and Tom could thank Mr. Gordon, they too left.

As quickly as possible, Ruth moved her company to the Creighton studio. By diligent work everything was made ready, and the first scenes in the new location were taken two days after Ruth had engaged the studio.

Mr. Hammond had praised Ruth highly when he learned of the business deal that had been put through. The damage to the Alectrion studio had been more extensive than the first ex-

amination had disclosed, and it was evident that the new studio must be used for several months.

Ruth found the Creighton studio to her liking. It was large and well lighted, admitting plenty of the warm California sun. Each morning found her at the studio bright and early, and she threw herself into her work with more energy than before.

The projection room disclosed that Ruth's work was good, but no one knew better than she how hard she worked for every effect gained. Miss Hadley, who had one of the important but minor parts, was an especial worry to the young director, for the actress apparently did not try to please.

"I wish I had never hired that Hadley girl," Ruth told herself after a particularly trying scene. "I'd drop her in a minute, but at this late date it would mean retaking many of the scenes."

Since the incident of the studio fire, Ruth had been too busy to give much thought to the accusation that had been made against her. The outburst of Mrs. Spitz at the home of the owner of the Creighton studio had only further convinced her that Mrs. Spitz was the writer of the anonymous notes which had caused so much trouble.

Tom had taken the typewritten note to a specialist for analysis, and Ruth waited impatiently to hear the result of the investigation.

For the next two days things moved so smoothly at the studio that Ruth actually told herself that her troubles were over. Mr. Hammond praised her work, and since the fire she had noticed less restraint on the part of the actors.

Ruth came down to the office on the third morning with more enthusiasm than usual. She had not been at her desk more than ten minutes when the telephone gave a sharp ring.

Surprised that any one was calling at this early hour, Ruth took down the receiver.

"Hello? Ruth?" Mr. Hammond's voice reached her ear. "I am on my way to the studio now. I must see you at once. Will you wait in your office?"

Ruth hung up the receiver, a puzzled frown upon her face. Mr. Hammond was disturbed about something. It was unusual for him to come to the studio before nine o'clock unless annoying business occupied his attention.

"I wonder what's up now?" she thought.

She did not have long to wonder, for in fifteen minutes Mr. Hammond arrived.

"Ruth, we're in for it," he began abruptly.

"What has happened?"

"Miss Hadley has thrown us over. Quit us cold."

"What? Why, she said nothing to me yesterday."

"Nevertheless, it's true. She's given me notice. Broken her contract."

"Miss Hadley has given me more trouble than any other actress on the lot. In one way I'll be glad to get rid of her."

"But you know what this means, Ruth?"

"Yes," Ruth admitted soberly. "It means retaking at least a dozen scenes and finding some one to take her place. Will you start suit against her for breaking the contract?"

Mr. Hammond shook his head ruefully.

"In the end it wouldn't pay. She couldn't even pay the court expenses. One of these actresses that spends her income before she gets it."

"Has she gone over to another company?" Ruth asked thoughtfully.

"Yes, this new company—The Rose Bower Film Company."

"Oh! That woman again!"

"The point of it is, Ruth, to find out what we are going to do. That's why I came down so early this morning. You must get some one to put in Miss Hadley's place!"

CHAPTER X

A NEW PROBLEM

After Mr. Hammond had left her office, Ruth mulled over in her mind the new problem that confronted her.

To select an actress who could take the part Miss Hadley had played was no easy task. True, hundreds of actresses seasoned to the screen were available, but most of them were entirely unsuited to this part. Those who were talented were usually signed up with a company months ahead of time.

It was a dangerous thing to select an extra and lift her to even a minor star part, for very frequently, try as a girl would, it was not possible for her to make good. Accordingly, the film company was confronted with the loss of considerable money on the venture.

"Edith Calvin is the logical one to lift into the part," Ruth told herself, "but she hasn't had much experience. She's doing well, much better than I expected, but whether or not she could make the grade on a bigger part, I don't know.

If she failed, it would mean a second retaking."

For several minutes Ruth, who usually made quick decisions, debated. It was not her money, but Mr. Hammond's that must be risked.

"I'll have to devote more time to rehearsals, if I use her," Ruth reasoned. "The work will go slower. On the other hand, she is young and fresh and photographs well. If she succeeds it will mean another star in the Alectrion crown. I'll try her."

To inform her actors and actresses that many of the scenes over which they had labored so long must be retaken, was not a task that Ruth relished. No one knew better than she how hard some of them had worked, and it was certain to discourage them when they learned that their work had availed nothing. It was characteristic of Ruth Fielding that she would think of her company and Mr. Hammond before she thought of herself—of the hours she had devoted to the scenes which must now be thrown away.

Promptly at the hour set for the day's filming to start, Ruth appeared. Quietly she explained what had happened and announced that the scenes in which Miss Hadley figured must be retaken. As she had expected, the announcement was received in a manner which left no doubt as to the attitude of the actors. The news that Miss Calvin was to be given an opportunity to fill the

rôle and that an extra was to take the part previously assigned to her, caused a ripple of comment. This, too, Ruth had anticipated.

For the first time Edith Calvin was noticed. Both friendly and hostile glances were cast in her direction. Edith, nearly overcome at the good news, was unaware of the critical survey she was being subjected to. She half started forward to thank Ruth, but Cora Brown caught hold of her arm.

"Don't thank her now," she said kindly in a low tone. "It isn't done. Just make good."

"That girl can't act," Edith heard some one near her say in a tone which was not intended to carry. "What is Miss Fielding thinking of? Why, that girl's so dumb that when she's told to register surprise, she opens her mouth and gets her teeth photographed!"

When Ruth called them to rehearsal, Edith Calvin was in a state of nervous tension. For her benefit, Ruth explained her directions very carefully, and rehearsed the scene three times.

"Now, Miss Calvin," she directed, "forget about yourself and think of the story. Your friend has just brought you bad news. Register surprise and pain. Begin!

Nervously, Edith Calvin glanced about at the actors who were curiously watching her from the sidelines. Then she opened her eyes wide, and her lips parted. Some one giggled.

"That wasn't quite right," Ruth told her patiently. "Try to remember to keep your mouth closed."

Edith tried again without success. She was so embarassed now that Ruth realized it was almost hopeless. Suddenly she turned to the cameraman and said something in a low tone. He nodded that he understood. Ruth again faced Edith.

"We'll try it once more," she ordered.

Again Edith failed to register the specified emotions.

Again some one giggled.

"I'm afraid you won't do," Ruth said regretfully. "I'm sorry."

"You mean—you can't use me in the picture?" Edith had forgotten the actors now. She stared at Ruth, her face working. She had been given her chance and she had failed!

Her shoulders drooped, and she stood before the camera, a dejected little figure. She did not see Ruth smile and raise her hand. She did not know that the camera was recording every movement, every expression.

"There, that was the way I wanted it!" Ruth declared enthusiastically. "You were splendid that time, Miss Calvin!"

For the first time Edith looked into the camera and gave a self-conscious start. For a moment she did not understand, then slowly it dawned

upon her that Ruth had ingeniously forced her to act naturally.

"You mean—I'm not through? I can go on with the picture?"

"Yes," Ruth told her with a warm smile. "Your expression in that scene couldn't have been better. Just let yourself go."

Many a director with less patience than Ruth Fielding would not have bothered with Edith Calvin, but would have dismissed her after the first futile attempt. Ruth, however, believed that the girl could act and that all she needed was the necessary technique.

After the first scene, Edith did better. Ruth's praise seemed to help, for she lost a great deal of her nervousness and concentrated on the work. Her chief fault was incorrect timing, Ruth discovered, and it was necessary to rehearse the scenes many times before the filming could begin.

A few of the actors complained because the work was slowed up, but the more sensible ones nodded their heads approvingly.

"Miss Fielding is right," one of them whispered to Cora Brown. "That girl has real talent. If she can learn to time her actions to the camera, she'll be made."

While the work went slowly, Ruth was well pleased. With each scene, Edith Calvin gained a little in poise and ability to "put over" what was expected. On the whole, Ruth judged that

the retaken scenes were better than when Miss Hadley had appeared in them.

Satisfied with the morning's work, Ruth gave the order for dismissal. She was careful not to force her actors to work too long under the bright lights, for the strain on the eyes was great.

While the actors moved away, Ruth remained upon the spot, checking up to see that each scene which had been taken had been carefully numbered and marked with direction for the assemblers and those who would handle the film after it left her hands.

As she finished giving orders to the cameramen, Ruth turned and saw that Fred Orman was waiting to speak to her.

"What is it?" she asked kindly.

"I just wanted to ask you again, Miss Fielding, if there's anything I can do to help you?"

"You mean——?"

"About the lies they're telling about your scenario."

"You have heard more gossip, then?" Ruth asked quietly, her face sober and strained.

"Yes, I have, Miss Fielding."

"I suppose—everyone knows—about the letters."

"I'm afraid it's pretty well noised around. I knew about Miss Hadley leaving before you mentioned it."

"You did?" Ruth demanded quickly. It was

indeed humiliating that she, the director, had been the last to learn that an actress had broken her contract.

"Yes, I heard it the first thing when I came down to the studio this morning. I guess she told around that she wouldn't work for—for——"

"Go on!" Ruth commanded, when Orman began to stammer. "Don't try to spare my feelings. What did she say?"

"She said she wouldn't work for a director that was a cheat and who couldn't get any ideas without stealing them."

"Oh!"

"If I'd heard her, I'd have told her a thing or two," Orman went on indignantly. "But I only learned what she had said second hand."

"Orman," Ruth said half-pleadingly, "you know I wrote that scenario, don't you?"

"Of course I do! I saw you writing it and I helped get it back when it was stolen. That's what I've been telling folks on the lot, but—" he broke off.

"But they won't believe you," Ruth finished for him.

"Some of them won't," Orman admitted bitterly. "Tell me," he asked again, "isn't there something I can do?"

"I'm afraid not. Thank you for offering. I know Mrs. Craven-Spitz is at the bottom of all

this trouble, but until I can definitely prove it, I must bide my time."

"I'm sorry I bothered you, Miss Fielding. I thought maybe you would want to know what folks were saying."

"Thank you for telling me, Orman. I suspected as much, though, so it really wasn't news to me."

As Ruth left Fred Orman and walked slowly toward her office it seemed that it was almost useless to struggle against the gossip that had loomed up about her.

"I have been so busy with my picture I haven't had time to think of ways to fight back at Mrs. Spitz," she reasoned. "Now I see I must organize my forces and battle her for all I'm worth unless I am to be involved in a scandal. If the newspapers should get hold of this I would be ruined. The public is so quick to believe the worst about a moving picture director or star."

Ruth's thoughts were interrupted at this point, for she saw Tom Cameron hurrying toward her.

"Oh, here you are, Ruth," he greeted her. "I've looked all over for you. Come to your office, quick!"

"What's the rush, Tommy?" Ruth asked, with a lazy smile. "I've been working this morning, and I don't feel like hurrying. Especially when I don't know whether I'm hurrying to meet good news or bad."

"Oh, you're getting pessimistic," Tom protested. "This is good news."

"Honest?" Ruth was still a trifle skeptical.

"Honest Injun, Ruthie. Helen's here."

"O-oh!" Ruth's eyes began to dance. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"You didn't give me a chance."

"When did she come, Tom? Has she been waiting long? Where is she now?"

"One question at a time, young lady. I thought you'd move faster when you found out who was here. She's waiting at your office."

Ruth required no urging to make her hurry now. Tom found it difficult to keep in step with her.

"When did she arrive?" Ruth asked again.

"Just a few minutes ago. Dropped down here at the studio without even telephoning."

"That's just like Helen," Ruth laughed. "Oh, I'm so anxious to see her again! It seems years since we were together!"

They reached Ruth's office and Tom opened the door.

"Helen!"

"Ruth!"

As the door opened, the plump, good-looking girl who sat in the chair near the window sprang to her feet and rushed across the room to embrace Ruth. For a moment they clung to each

other, then Ruth held her chum and sister-in-law off at arm's length and looked at her.

"It's good to see you again, Helen."

"And you, Ruth."

The muscles of Helen's face began to twitch.

"Come, Helen, don't start crying," Tom teased in brotherly fashion.

"I'm not crying!" Helen did not turn to her brother, but kept her eyes on Ruth's face. "I'm just all upset!"

"If Ruth has that effect on every one—" Tom began, but Helen cut him short with one look.

"This is no time for joking, Tom! Something terrible has happened!"

"Not father——?"

"No, no! It's about Ruth!"

At the words, Ruth's arms dropped from Helen's shoulders and went limply down to her sides. She had seemed to know that the news Tom brought was not good.

"What about Ruth?" Tom demanded hoarsely, for Ruth could not find her voice.

"Look at this and read for yourself!" Helen thrust a newspaper into Tom's hand. "It's dreadful! Dreadful!"

CHAPTER XI

THE NEWSPAPER STORY

"TELL me what it all means, Ruth!" Helen Cameron pleaded. "I can't understand."

"Nor can I, Helen. It makes me fairly sick. The reputation I've worked so hard to gain—gone!"

"It isn't ruined yet," Tom said grimly. "The paper doesn't mention your name."

"No, but it is clear I am the one who is meant."

Ruth glanced again at the paper which Helen had brought from Los Angeles. The marked item stated that information had been discovered which proved that a prize scenario had not been the original work of the young woman who claimed to be the author, but had been taken from the scenario of a Los Angeles writer, now dead. The article hinted that the entire story would soon come out.

"There's no question it means Ruth," Helen insisted. "The story says prize scenario, and hers is the only prize scenario I have heard anything about."

"It means me all right, Helen. I've been expecting this."

"But I don't understand, Ruth!"

"It's a long story, Helen, and I haven't the energy to tell you now. This is the work of an enemy—Mrs. Craven-Spitz, I feel certain."

"You can sue her for libel," Helen cried. "You can prove your innocence. We all know you wrote the scenario. Tom, Chess, Fred Orman, and myself. We'll testify."

"And while the case was coming to court, the publicity would hurt me terribly. Not only that, it would practically ruin Mr. Hammond's picture."

"Ruth's right there, Helen," Tom put in. "If the matter gets into the newspapers, it will finish any picture Ruth is connected with."

"But it's in the paper now," Helen protested.

"Ruth's name hasn't been mentioned. While it's clear she is the one the writer has in mind, only those who are closely connected with the moving picture business will realize that Ruth is the one the story means."

"Every one in Hollywood will know," Ruth dropped her head upon her hands, hopelessly discouraged. Helen rushed to her and put her arms about her chum's shoulders comfortingly. "It will be terrible to face people when I know I am under suspicion. But I won't go away! I'll stay and fight!"

"That's the way to talk!" Helen exclaimed. "Now you're getting the old spirit back. And don't forget, I'm here to help you. Chess will be along, too."

"Chess?" Tom asked. "Is he coming?"

"In about a week, if he can manage to leave his business that soon."

"What did I tell you, Ruth?" Tom laughed.

Ruth made a feeble attempt to smile.

"What is it you're hinting at now?" Helen gave her twin brother's ears a yank.

"Oh, nothing, Sis. I just told Ruth that Chess would be trailing along after you. You're the shining light of his life."

"When are you going to get married?" Ruth asked curiously.

"Oh, not for a long time! I'm having a good time, even if I am just about the last one of our old college crowd left."

"Tell me about the others," Ruth begged. "I haven't heard any news for ages."

"There isn't much to tell. After the wedding, every one scattered. Jennie Stone Marchand went off with her husband for a trip to Egypt. I suppose she's having the time of her life now riding the camels."

"I pity the camel!" Ruth chuckled, forgetting for the time being her trouble. "After he'd carried Jennie a mile he'd be sway-backed!"

"I had a letter from Ann Hicks a few weeks

ago. She's running a ranch of her own now."

"I always thought Ann would do that," Ruth replied.

"But you can never guess the best part of it. She's turned the cow pasture into a golf course!"

"And Madge Steel?"

"I've lost track of her. But Nettie Parsons is still in the South. She's fallen in love, I think, so it's about her time to go, I suppose."

Ruth and Tom exchanged smiles.

"You know very well, you'll be the next to get married, Helen," Ruth teased.

"Oh, I don't know." Helen looked dreamy, and relapsed into silence.

Tom glanced at his watch.

"Sorry to interrupt those sweet thoughts of Chess, Helen, but I know you must be hungry."

"Hungry! I'm almost starved!"

"How about the Hollywood Inn?" Ruth suggested. "I feel like celebrating now that Helen has arrived."

"Let's go there," Helen agreed. "That place has atmosphere, and I'll admit I'm good and lonesome for the Hollywood air again."

Ruth carefully locked the newspaper Helen had given her in her desk, and the three left the studio. As they motored along the boulevard toward the outskirts of the city where the Hollywood Inn was located, Ruth questioned Helen about her old friends at Cheslow. Both she and

Tom were glad to learn that Mr. Cameron had fully recovered from his serious illness and was going about his work as usual.

"Tell me about Aunt Alvirah," Ruth commanded. "Does she miss me?"

"Miss you? I rather guess she does. That reminds me! She sent you something—a box of home made cookies."

"I'll attend to those," Tom put in promptly.

"Dear Aunt Alvirah," Ruth said softly. "I wish things were easier for her. If she would only let me, I could bring her out here and give her so many comforts of life."

"Aunt Alvirah would never be happy away from the Red Mill," Helen answered. "You have no idea how much enjoyment she gets from that radio you and Tom gave her on her birthday. She spends half her time trying to tune in to Hollywood."

"And Uncle Jabez? How is he getting along?"

"As miserly as usual. He thinks you're all right though, Ruth. He goes around Cheslow bragging that his niece was the one that rounded up the bank robbers."

"I didn't do it alone," Ruth reminded Helen modestly.

By this time they had reached the Hollywood Inn, noted for the set of famous moving picture people who patronized it. Ruth and Helen waited

until Tom had parked the car, and the three went inside.

Ruth and Tom were instantly recognized by the head waiter, who bowed pleasantly and led the party to a choice table near the window overlooking the rose garden.

"It's wonderful to be back," Helen breathed, as she looked about at the various tables. "I see so many stars I know."

Ruth smiled at Helen's enthusiasm, and turned her attention to the menu.

"Who is that woman over at the other side of the room?" Helen asked a moment later.

"Where?" Ruth glanced up from the menu.

"See? Over on the east side. The woman in the red dress. She's staring at you hard and she looks very cross."

Tom, too, had looked in the direction Helen indicated.

"Jove!" he emitted in an undertone.

The woman was Mrs. Craven-Spitz.

As they looked at her, Mrs. Craven-Spitz returned their glances with an ill bred scowl. She pushed back her chair and started toward them.

Tom and Ruth looked at each other uneasily.

"We're in for it now!" Tom muttered.

CHAPTER XII

THE ENCOUNTER

As Mrs. Craven-Spitz approached the table at which the Cameron party was seated, it was evident from the expression of her face that she was deliberately going out of her way to make trouble.

"She'll try to create a scene!" Ruth whispered.

Tom nodded. He had no time to reply, for Mrs. Spitz was upon them.

Tom, who realized that the most sensible thing he could do would be to try to prevent a scene, arose politely from his chair, although in actuality he was feeling far from chivalrous.

Mrs. Spitz gave him a haughty stare.

"You needn't get up!" she said in a spiteful voice, one which carried to every corner of the large dining room. "You needn't think for a moment that I would sit down at a table with a woman like Ruth Fielding!"

"Take care!" Tom warned in a low tone, with an effort controlling his temper. "I warn you, you're going too far."

By this time every one in the dining room had

ceased eating. Every eye automatically turned to the table where Ruth Fielding sat. Ruth's face burned at the humiliation of the scene, but she eyed Mrs. Craven-Spitz courageously.

"Ruth Fielding is a plagiarist!" Mrs. Spitz announced, more for the benefit of those in the dining room than for the party seated at the table. "I can prove it!"

Ruth could stand the insults no longer. She sprang to her feet, eyes flashing.

"You can't prove it! And what is more, you are making yourself liable for a damage suit!"

Mrs. Craven-Spitz was given no opportunity to prolong the painful scene, for the head waiter now touched her on the shoulder.

"Madam, you must return to your table or leave."

With an angry toss of her head, Mrs. Spitz marched back to her table and began to gather up her things. There was a smile of satisfaction on her face.

"Oh, the horrid cat!" Helen breathed.

"She's gone too far!" Tom snapped.

"Oh, let's not talk about it until we get outside," Ruth begged. "Let's get away quickly. We can't stay here now—everyone is looking at us."

It was true that Ruth had become the center of interest. The guests were whispering and staring at the young director.

"They just love to be in on a scandal," Helen fumed.

The three had not placed their orders, and were glad to escape from the dining room. Their escape was not complete, however, for they were followed by two men who stopped Ruth as soon as she was outside.

"Reporters for the Star," they told her tersely.

"Reporters?" Ruth gasped.

It seemed that fate was indeed against her.

"What have you to say?"

"Nothing!" Ruth snapped shortly.

"Mrs. Spitz' accusation was false—absolutely false!" Helen cried. "Don't you dare print a word of what she said in your paper!"

"It isn't false. It's true!" Ruth and her friends turned suddenly to find that Mrs. Craven-Spitz had followed them from the dining room.

The reporters left Ruth and turned to Mrs. Spitz.

"Come on," Ruth pleaded, when Helen and Tom hesitated.

"I'm not going to let that woman hand those reporters a pack of lies!" Tom stormed.

"They'll spread it all over the front page, no matter what you say," Ruth insisted. "You'll only get yourself into it if you try to help me. There's nothing we can say that will do any good. We can't fight her with words."

"I'd like to claw her to pieces," Helen de-

clared furiously. "The nerve of her—telling such tales!"

"Do you know what this means, Ruth?" Tom began soberly.

"Do I know? Oh, Tom, no one realizes better than I! It means my finish here in Hollywood unless I can find some means of proving my innocence. I wish I had never written that scenario. It's given me trouble from start to finish."

"Don't say that," Helen begged. "We're not through with Mrs. Spitz yet! Just you wait. Chess will help us too, and we'll show her up."

"I hope so, but I'm afraid this affair to-day will ruin my reputation. The reporters will spread the story on the front pages. They'll eat it up!"

The three relapsed into a gloomy silence, which at length was broken by Tom.

"Where shall we eat?"

"I'm not hungry." This from Helen. "I've lost my appetite."

"Take us home, Tom," Ruth pleaded. "I can't work any more to-day. I want to go home."

At the bungalow, Helen tried to comfort her chum, but only in a measure did she succeed. Ruth seemed stunned, unable to believe that she was really involved in a scandal. Nervously, she paced the floor.

"Tom, do you suppose the afternoon papers are on the street yet? I must see them."

"It's better to know the worst," Helen agreed. "Then we'll be in a better position to fight Mrs. Spitz."

"I'll go and see if I can get a paper," Tom rejoined.

After Tom had left the bungalow, Ruth turned to Helen with a rueful smile.

"This is a fine way to treat you on your first day in Hollywood, Helen."

"Don't mind about me, Ruthie. That's the least of it. I only wish I could help."

The conversation ended as Tom appeared with three newspapers in his hands. He dropped them on the davenport, and Helen and Ruth fell upon them.

"I knew it!" Ruth cried. "On the front page!"

"Oh!" Helen had caught up another paper. "Your picture is in this one."

The three, with sinking hearts, read the stories in the two papers. The third paper had failed to carry an account of Ruth's encounter with Mrs. Spitz at the Inn and the accusation made against her.

The story was practically the same in both papers. The Star openly condemned Ruth in its headline which read: Director Lifts Plot to Win Scenario Prize.

The other paper was more conservative and merely stated that Ruth Fielding had been accused. The accusation, Ruth learned from the

two stories, was that many of the main scenes in the prize winning scenario had been taken from another scenario, called "Storm Tossed," written by John James Pudkin, who had died in Los Angeles the previous year. This scenario had been marked as having been submitted to the Fielding Film Company two years before and returned unaccepted. The manuscript had been resurrected from a trunk among Pudkin's effects in a Los Angeles storage house, and the similarity of this story and the prize scenario had been noted at once.

"Well, I never heard such a story!" Helen exclaimed. "It doesn't even sound plausible."

"Plausible enough for a great many persons to believe it, I'm afraid," Tom said soberly.

"It's bad enough to accuse me of stealing a plot—but from a dead man!" Ruth was bitter.

"Did you ever hear of this manuscript, 'Storm Tossed?'" Tom asked thoughtfully. "There might accidently be a similarity."

"No, I never heard of it, and I feel certain it was never written. I can't believe I could have written a plot so unoriginal as to have it duplicated by a scrub writer."

"Nor can I," Helen added. "It's just the work of that hateful woman."

In spite of all Tom and Helen could say, Ruth refused to be cheered. She went to bed discouraged and blue. However, a good night's rest

did wonders for her, and she arose the next morning feeling more like her usual self.

Helen of course, was staying at the bungalow with Tom and Ruth during her Hollywood visit, and at breakfast the three read the papers and discussed a plan of action. In spite of the attempt at cheerful conversation, breakfast was a decidedly gloomy affair. Tom had gone out on the street at an early hour and had secured all the morning papers.

The newspapers had only repeated the same story which had run the previous day, so there was nothing new to be learned from that source. Only three of the papers carried the story at all. The others had ignored the matter.

"That shows Mrs. Spitz isn't believed by every one," Helen insisted. "Some of the editors are using judgment."

"It's a serious thing to print a story about a person that isn't true," Ruth commented. "It frequently results in a suit for libel."

"What do you plan to do about it, Ruth?" Helen asked.

"I can't do anything until I am in a position to prove my innocence. I suppose the first thing to do is to find out if there really is such a manuscript as 'Storm Tossed.'"

"How can you find out?" Tom questioned.

"I don't know. Perhaps the Los Angeles paper that first printed the story has a copy of

the manuscript. I'll write a letter to the paper to-day."

"I wish Chess were here," Helen put in. "He always has such brilliant ideas. He's in his element when he's doing detective work."

At this moment, the maid entered the dining room and addressed Ruth.

"There is a gentleman outside to see you."

"At this hour!" Helen gasped.

"Another reporter, I'll venture," Ruth said grimly. She turned to the maid. "Tell him I can't see him."

The maid was saved the trouble of carrying the message, for the visitor stood in the doorway, grinning at the group around the breakfast table.

It was Chess Copley.

"So you won't see me," he laughed. "Why the chilly welcome?"

"Chess Copley!" Helen fairly shrieked his name. "How did you get here so soon?"

"You're certainly the answer to a maiden's prayer," Tom declared with a teasing glance at his twin sister. "Helen was just wishing you were here."

Ruth quickly got up from her chair and hurried to greet Chess.

"We weren't expecting you for several days, but you're certainly welcome."

"Well, to tell the truth, I did come more quickly than I had expected," Chess admitted.

"Who do you think I ran into in Chicago? Jack Markham. He offered me a lift to Hollywood and I took it."

"You came in Markham's plane?" Helen asked. "How thrilling!"

"It was thrilling. That fellow is a regular demon pilot. I'd have come even sooner if I had known Ruth was in trouble."

"You've heard then?" Ruth demanded, her heart sinking.

"Yes, I read it in the paper this morning."

"You don't believe the story, do you?" Ruth asked anxiously.

"I should say not! I know it couldn't be true because I saw you writing that scenario. Tell me, Ruth, isn't there something I can do to help?"

"I'm afraid not. We haven't very many clues to work on."

"Perhaps I can run down something."

"If you do, I'll be eternally grateful!" Ruth glanced at her watch. "Chess, I'm sorry to run off this way, but I positively must go. I'm due at the studio in ten minutes, and I'm afraid I'll be late. Anyway, I know you'll have a lot to say to Helen."

"Don't stop anything on my account," Chess assured her quickly. "I'm here to help, not to stop your work. Helen and I will get along famously." Chess gave Helen a significant look.

"Just make yourself at home then," Ruth told

him. "We have a room all ready for you. When your things come, you can have them sent up. If there is anything special you want, ring for the maid. Tom and I will have a good long talk with you this evening when we get back."

After Tom and Ruth had hurried away to the studio, Helen and Chess were left together. Before Chess could broach a more personal topic, Helen turned to him, determination in her eyes. She gave him a brief account of the recent occurrences and ended with:

"Chess, Ruth and Tom are so busy they haven't time to track this Mrs. Spitz down and prove that she's nothing but a faker. I think we should take the matter in hand ourselves."

Chess nodded, and Helen went on.

"It makes me fighting mad! I can't stand it to just sit still and do nothing."

"I don't know anything about this Mrs. Spitz except what I've learned since I struck Hollywood. Just the same, it strikes me she's a rather suspicious character and I intend to keep my eye on her. That will be my job!"

CHAPTER XIII

AN OUTING

"RUTH has worked like a Trojan this week, Tom. I'm certainly glad she can take a little rest now."

Tom and Helen stood at the rail of the yacht, *The Prince,* rented by the Alectrion Film Corporation for the purpose of photographing scenes on the ocean and at Catalina Island. The yacht was anchored at the dock, and, as Helen spoke, she glanced out across the expanse of blue water and took a deep breath.

"I'm afraid this trip to Catalina will be more fun for us than for Ruth," Tom said slowly. "She'll be as busy as ever directing the scenes."

"Oh, of course it won't be exactly fun for Ruth, but at least she'll be away from that old studio and out in the open air. I think that place was getting on her nerves."

"I know it was," Tom declared, "and I don't wonder. If I'd have gone through as much as she has, I think I'd be a nervous wreck. I hope this trip helps her to forget all the unpleasant things that have happened."

"Where is Ruth, anyway?" Helen glanced anxiously at her watch. "We're to leave the harbor at nine, aren't we?"

"Yes. But Ruth will be here all right. She's never late. Mr. Hammond was to bring her down in his car after they had attended to some business at the studio. Mr. Hammond decided at the last minute that he would go along."

"Oh, I didn't know that." Helen frowned slightly. "Do you think he's—quite satisfied with Ruth's work?"

"Oh, yes," Tom answered easily. "Why shouldn't he be?"

"It was a foolish question, I guess." Helen, however, remained thoughtful.

At exactly three minutes to nine, Mr. Hammond's car rolled up to the dock. Tom and Helen, who were watching for Ruth, waved their hands from the rail and called to her. Ruth responded, and hurried up the gangplank, followed by Mr. Hammond. Orders were at once given to be under way. Ropes were hauled in, the gangplank was lifted, and for a few minutes there was some confusion aboard as the members of Ruth's company sought desirable seats on the shady side of the boat.

"I imagine you thought I wasn't going to get here," Ruth said, as she greeted Tom and Helen at the rail.

"I was beginning to worry," Helen admitted. "What kept you?"

"Oh, last minute business—and something else." Ruth dropped her voice. "I have something I want to show you. Will you come downstairs to the cabin where we won't be heard?"

Wonderingly, Tom and Helen followed Ruth and Mr. Hammond. When the four were seated, Ruth opened her handbag and took out a fat envelope.

"I have a copy of the scenario, 'Storm Tossed,'" Ruth announced with satisfaction. "I've been trying to get it for days."

"Have you read it?" Helen asked quickly.

"Not yet. It came in the mail just about five minutes before I left the studio. I got it from a Los Angeles newspaper. It isn't the original, of course, but they assured me it is an exact copy."

"Read it!" Tom commanded. "Let's see if it sounds like your prize scenario."

Accordingly, Ruth opened the pages of the manuscript and in a clear voice began to read.

The scenario was not skillfully written, but Ruth and her friends were appalled at the similarity between it and the prize scenario. The big storm scene of Ruth's scenario was very like a storm scene in the manuscript of the late John James Pudkin. The wreck of the church which had made such an effective scene in Ruth's manuscript was duplicated in "Storm Tossed." Many

minor scenes also appeared strangely similar.

"I don't see how they could be so much alike," Ruth gasped, when she had finished reading the manuscript.

Mr. Hammond shook his head in perplexity. Helen and Tom looked worried.

"I admit, Ruth," Mr. Hammond said, "this manuscript gives the whole matter an unpleasant turn."

"Have you looked up this fellow Pudkin?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I've gone into all the old records. He did submit a scenario to us several years ago, but it wasn't called 'Storm Tossed.'"

"There's no denying that the scenarios are alike," Helen commented.

"They sound so much alike that if I didn't know better, I'd actually believe they were copies," Ruth admitted gloomily.

"Well, I wouldn't spend too much time worrying about it, Ruth," Mr. Hammond advised. "You young folks had better forget all this and go up on deck and enjoy the ocean."

Ruth smiled and put away the copy of "Storm Tossed," although she knew that she could not as easily put the matter from her mind. Tom and Helen, who considered Mr. Hammond's suggestion an excellent one, each caught Ruth by an arm, and half pushed her from the cabin.

After the three had gone up on deck, Mr. Ham-

mond remained quietly in his chair, thinking.

"It's mighty strange," he mused. "Mighty strange. I've always considered Ruth Fielding too strong to fall victim to temptation. And yet——"

Mr. Hammond abruptly arose from his chair, as though he did not wish his mind to dwell upon an unpleasant thought.

On deck, Ruth was trying to obey Mr. Hammond's command. From the depths of a comfortable deck chair, she dreamily watched the waves, her eyes half-closed. Tom made a pretense of reading the paper, but for the most part he was looking at Ruth. Helen, who had a chair near by, was wholly absorbed in a novel.

"Tired, Ruth?"

Ruth opened her eyes and smiled at Tom.

"No, I'm not tired."

"Just discouraged?"

"Well, it's natural, isn't it? Don't mind me, Tom. I really am enjoying the ocean. The water seems unusually smooth, too, doesn't it?"

"Smooth?" Helen glanced up from the novel. "Look at those big waves. This tub rocks like a crazy boat!"

"Not getting seasick already, are you?" Tom teased.

"Seasick? I should say not! Just the same, I hope it doesn't get any rougher."

"Helen isn't seasick," Ruth put in. "She's just lonesome for Chess."

"Lonesome, nothing," Helen retorted good-naturedly. "I can get along for a couple of days without seeing him."

A number of actors strolled over from the other side of the deck to see what the fun was about. Soon a group had congregated about Ruth. Some one started a phonograph, and at once the spirits of the crowd began to revive.

"I hope those clouds go away," Ruth said to Helen rather anxiously. "We must take some scenes this afternoon."

"Oh, there will be plenty of sunlight," Helen declared easily. "Too much, probably. I'm all sunburned now."

Helen turned her back that Ruth might inspect the strip of red on her neck, but Ruth did not take her eyes from the sky. Black, menacing clouds were rolling up.

Ruth wet a finger and held it to the wind.

"There's going to be a storm!" she said in a tense voice.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GALE

"I CAN'T believe it will storm," Helen protested, as she too scanned the sky anxiously. "The sun is shining as brightly as ever."

"That may be, but just look at those clouds," Ruth declared. "And the air is oppressive."

"But the clouds aren't very big."

"Not yet, but they will be. Unless I can't read the signs, we're in for a real storm. Often these coast storms come without warning."

Ruth was not the only one aboard the yacht who believed that a storm was on its way. Already the sailors were fastening ropes more securely, and tying down loose objects. The work was done so quietly that it passed unnoticed by the members of Ruth's company who were entertaining themselves on the dance floor.

"You see, I was right," Ruth told Helen. "There is going to be a storm."

Helen began to look alarmed.

"Oh, dear, I hope I won't be seasick."

"Don't worry, you probably won't. I wonder where the head property man is? I must tell him

to look after the Alectrion company's equipment."

Ruth turned abruptly and hastened across the deck. Helen followed her more slowly. Ruth spoke a few words to the captain of the yacht, and then turned again to Helen.

"The captain says the storm is likely to be a severe one. We won't have longer than ten minutes to work!"

"Hello, Ruth, I was looking for you." Tom Cameron, who had been sunning himself on the other side of the deck, had noticed the dark clouds and had hurried to call Ruth's attention to the approaching storm. "Anything I can do to help, Ruth?"

"Yes, I wish you would find the property man and have him look after the equipment. Everything must be either taken below, or covered with tarpaulins."

Tom hurried away to carry out Ruth's suggestion. He returned almost immediately with the property man and a number of helpers. The cameramen also left the group on the dance floor and came over to Ruth.

"How about shooting a few scenes if we get into a real storm?" one of them asked.

"There's no question but that we're in for a genuine storm," Ruth returned with a smile. "If you can get something good, I think we can incorporate it in the picture."

As the property man and his helpers carried equipment down into the cabin, and covered the heavier objects with canvas, many of the actors and actresses who watched the work, openly smiled.

The more practical ones, however, glanced at the sky and watched the fast moving clouds. Gradually the sun was blotted out, and as the sky took on a yellow cast, every one began to look uneasy.

The dance floor was deserted; the phonograph ran down and ceased its music in one forlorn squawk. One by one the members of the company went below to seek comfortable chairs. With the first flash of lightning the decks were left practically empty.

The cameramen had set up their cameras and were busy photographing the approaching storm under Ruth's direction.

Ruth glanced at the sky.

"It's a matter of seconds now until the storm strikes us!" she warned. "Get back under cover, every one!"

The work of protecting the company equipment had been finished just in time. There was a blinding flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, and with it a deulge of rain that sent every one scurrying for cover. As Tom ran he caught sight of a loose piece of canvas and stooped to fasten it more securely.

At that moment the storm broke in full force upon the little yacht. The deck tilted crazily.

Tom tried to save himself, but lost his balance completely. He went sprawling across the deck and crashed violently into the railing.

In spite of the rolling of the yacht, Ruth managed to reach him.

"Are you hurt, Tom?"

Tom clung to the railing and slowly picked himself up, maintaining his balance with difficulty. He shouted that he was all right, but Ruth only guessed at the answer, for the roar of the wind and the sea was in her ears.

Supporting each other, Ruth and Tom staggered across the deck to where the cameramen were waiting for them. The rain fell in torrents and it was impossible to see a dozen feet ahead.

"I'd hate to be steering this old tub," Tom commented as he shook the water from his cap.

"Let's go downstairs where it's dry," Ruth suggested.

In the cabin below they found that everything was not pleasant, for many of the actors were undergoing severe cases of seasickness.

"You'll have a great time trying to recruit your actors for the scenes this afternoon," Tom observed dryly to Ruth.

"Tom is actually assuming we'll reach Catalina," Helen groaned. "Do you think the yacht will hold together that far, Ruth?"

"Let's hope so," was Ruth's evasive answer, given with a reassuring smile.

In her own mind she was not as confident as she wished to appear. Ruth had no desire to alarm either Helen or the members of her company, yet she realized that they were all in grave danger. The yacht was small and was not built for rough weather. Then, too, the storm was no ordinary one, and Ruth knew that it was steadily increasing in violence.

The air in the cabin was stuffy and unpleasant. Presently, as the rolling of the ship became less pronounced, Tom became restless.

"Let's go up on deck," he proposed to Ruth and Helen. "I'd rather get wet than die of suffocation."

Ruth and Helen also preferred the open air, and the three, after slipping into oilskin garments, made their way up the narrow stairs to the deck.

"I don't see how boats keep from running into each other when it's like this," Helen gasped.

The words were scarcely out of her mouth when the yacht suddenly swerved. Then came a violent crash. Ruth, who had just stepped out upon the open deck, was sent reeling.

At once there was confusion on deck. Sailors ran this way and that, and the captain's orders were bawled out above the roar of the wind.

Ruth quickly recovered from the blow she had received and raised herself from the deck where she had fallen. She ran to the railing. Even before her eyes could pierce the darkness, she knew what had happened. The yacht had struck another boat.

In spite of the blinding rain, Ruth managed to make out that the other boat was a small fishing vessel. It was sinking rapidly, having been cut almost into two pieces. The yacht apparently had not been damaged by the collision for it was the larger of the two boats.

As the fishing vessel sank, men jumped into the water to save themselves. Their cries mingled with the hoarse shouts of the sailors aboard the yacht.

"They'll never live in that sea!" Tom, who had reached the railing, cried to Ruth.

In horror, Ruth gazed down upon the struggling men in the water.

"Isn't there something we can do to help?" she half-moaned.

Her eye fell upon a life-preserver, and she ran toward it. Untying the rope, she carried the preserver back to the railing. Taking careful aim, she tossed it into the hands of one of the struggling men.

By this time, the alarmed passengers were pouring out from the cabin. Confusion threatened.

"Everything is all right!" Ruth cried. "The boat isn't sinking!"

Under orders from the captain, the sailors aboard the yacht worked quietly and rapidly. In an incredibly short time the four men from the ill fated fishing vessel were rescued from the waves.

"They have all four now," Ruth said to Tom with a relieved sigh. "And I do believe the storm is letting up."

"The sky is brighter," Tom admitted. "I guess the storm is about over."

Ruth left Tom and went below. She was interested in the welfare of the four men who had been rescued, and was relieved to find them none the worse for the accident, save that they had lost their boat.

"The men don't blame our captain for the accident," Ruth told Tom when she returned to the deck. "Now, that the storm is past, I feel that most of our trouble is over."

"I'm afraid the morale of the company is shattered."

"I hope not." Ruth frowned. "I almost wish Mr. Hammond hadn't come with us this trip."

"He can't hold you responsible for the storm."

"He never blames me for anything. My directing has always pleased him. Only—I wonder why he came?"

"Oh, probably just for the trip."

"I doubt it. I have a feeling he has decided to keep an eye on me until this trouble over the scenario is settled. I don't believe he doubts me, but he probably feels that the worry of it all has made it impossible for me to devote my best work to the picture."

"Well, he'll have another guess coming then," Tom said firmly.

The storm had died away almost as quickly as it had come up. While the waves remained choppy, the sun came out brightly, and with it spirits revived. Nevertheless, every one was glad to leave the yacht when Catalina was at last reached. Even Ruth, who had not been seasick during the voyage, was relieved to set foot on land.

The young director at once dispatched the members of her company to a hotel that they might rest while preparations were made for the filming of the various scenes. She also saw to it that the fishermen who had been picked up during the voyage were given proper care.

Although her company rested, there was no rest for Ruth Fielding. First she negotiated for two motorboats which she planned to use in aquaplaning. Then flags and pennants were strung up along the yacht-club wharf, and the place took on new life and color.

The bay, with the mountains coming down almost to the shore, made a beautiful back-

ground. Other scenes were to be taken upon the yacht, and for these practically no preparation was required.

At two o'clock, Ruth called her actors to action. They came, with varying degrees of willingness, but once the work was well under way the disagreeable events of the morning were forgotten.

Ruth knew exactly what she was about, and exactly the effects she wished to gain. The work went smoothly, and the scenes on the wharf and on the yacht were soon completed. Then came the aquaplaning scenes.

Cora Brown and one other girl were to ride the boards, as they were both excellent swimmers and had often engaged in the sport. The scene was given one rehearsal which went through without a hitch. At the proper moment, Cora Brown lost her balance on the board and toppled into the water, as she was supposed to do.

"All ready?" Ruth demanded when the rehearsal had been completed to her satisfaction.

She signaled the pilots of the motorboats. The two boats shot across the water at an angle which would keep them in range of the cameras. Cora Brown and the extra balanced themselves skillfully on the boards which trailed the water behind the boats.

"Now!" Ruth shouted through her mega-

phone. It was the signal for Cora Brown to fall into the water.

Accordingly, the girl apparently lost her balance on the board and began a realistic struggle to regain it. Then she shot off into the water.

"Great stuff!" one of the cameramen emitted, as he steadily turned the crank.

Ruth Fielding did not hear, for she was watching the water. As Cora Brown had slipped into the water, Ruth could not be certain, but she thought the girl had struck her head against the side of the board. It had all happened so suddenly that the young director wondered if her eyes had deceived her.

A moment passed and Cora Brown's head did not appear above the water. Ruth Fielding was the only one who had noticed anything amiss.

Both motorboats had driven in toward shore, and Ruth realized that there was no one nearer than herself to the scene of the accident. She dropped her megaphone and jerked off her shoes. While the cameramen stared at her in astonishment, she plunged into the water and struck off for the spot where she had seen Cora disappear. Using the six-beat crawl stroke which carried her through the water at a rapid rate, Ruth quickly reached the place where the girl had gone down.

Ruth, who was an excellent swimmer, had studied American Red Cross life saving, and now, as she peered down into the water and

caught no glimpse of Cora, she quickly drew her knees up to her body in preparation for a surface dive. Suddenly, she straightened her body and shot down below the surface of the water.

At first Ruth could see nothing, but gradually she made out a shadow below her. Her breath was nearly gone, but Ruth forced herself to hold it a little longer. With all her strength she swam toward the object below her.

She reached out and gripped something. It was the strap of a bathing suit. Quickly, she swung the girl to her, and into position on her hip for the cross-chest carry. Swimming with her free right arm, and holding Cora with her left, she regained the surface of the water.

By this time, those on shore were aware of what had happened, and before Ruth could take a dozen strokes she was relieved of the unconscious girl by several men who had jumped into the motorboat and had driven out to meet her. Ruth, too, was pulled aboard the boat.

One of the men turned Cora over on her face and would have started artificial respiration, but Ruth checked him.

"She hasn't swallowed water. She struck her head against the board and was knocked unconscious. She'll come around in a few minutes."

Even as Ruth spoke, Cora stirred slightly, and after a little attention, she sat up and gingerly felt of her head.

"You'll soon feel better," Ruth comforted her, as she slipped a warm sweater over the girl's shoulders.

"Who pulled me out?" Cora demanded shakily.

"Ruth Fielding did," some one told her. "The rest of us were asleep. We didn't even know anything had happened until she pulled you out."

Cora began to thank Ruth, but the latter warned her not to try to talk.

"Was the scene all right?" Cora asked.

"Absolutely," Ruth told her, with a smile. "It won't have to be retaken."

Satisfied, Cora obeyed Ruth's suggestion and did not try to do any more talking.

"Too bad the rescue wasn't in the script," one of the cameramen commented. "That would have made a corking scene. Seems like an audience never sees the best part of a picture."

Ruth, who was dripping wet, hurried to the hotel to change her clothing. The motorboat scenes had been the last ones on her schedule, and the work for the day was over.

"In spite of the accident, things went rather well to-day," Ruth said when she had returned to the wharf and was watching the Alectrion Film Corporation yacht being loaded for the return trip to Los Angeles.

"Yes," Tom, who was standing beside her, agreed. "Mr. Hammond was certainly impressed

with your work to-day—to say nothing about the rescue. You were great, Ruth!"

"Any one would have done the same."

"I'm not so sure of that, my girl. Every one isn't as brave as you are."

Ruth smiled at the compliment, but the smile faded almost instantly.

"I'm dead tired," she admitted. "It's been a hard day for me, even though a satisfactory one. I'll be glad when we get back to Hollywood."

"Same here, Ruth. It's been a hectic trip."

"I don't believe Helen has enjoyed it much. Chess should have come along. By the way, where is she?"

"At the hotel, I guess. She missed the rescue, and when she hears that, she'll feel cheated."

"She doesn't seem to have much pep unless Chess is along," Ruth commented.

"I've noticed that. Odd that he didn't care for the trip, isn't it? He's usually in for anything that even remotely sounds like adventure."

"And he's usually in for anything that Helen wants to do," Ruth added. "Chess must have a very particular reason for not coming with us. I wonder what it is?"

CHAPTER XV

CHESS INVESTIGATES

CHESS COPLEY had declined to accompany his friends on the Catalina Island trip for a very particular reason, and that reason he had confided only to Helen Cameron.

"If it's to be proved that Ruth is innocent of the charge made against her by Mrs. Spitz, some one must get busy," he had told Helen. "Tom and Ruth haven't the time to dig into the matter, and I have. I'll stay here while you folks go to Catalina, and I'll see if I can discover anything."

Chess had secretly gone to an agency which had secured information for him concerning the late John James Pudkin.

He had learned that Pudkin had formerly lived in Hollywood, and the information from the agency included the address of his rooming and boarding house.

"It won't do any harm to go there first," Chess, now left alone in Hollywood, decided.

Tom had left his roadster at Chess's disposal, and, in the search for the boarding house, Chess

found it a time-saver. After some difficulty he located the street and number, finding the house in a poor section of town.

He went up the steps of the boarding house and rang the bell. It was opened almost immediately by a sloppy fat landlady. Her apron was dirty, her heels were run over, and she presented an almost repulsive appearance.

"Well, what do you want?" she demanded crossly.

There was a crafty look about the woman that Chess did not like. He instantly made up his mind that if he were to discover anything worth while, he must use strategy.

"Have you a room for rent?" he asked politely.

The woman's manner underwent a change, and she stepped aside to allow him to enter.

"Right this way. I got a fine front room you'll like. And let me tell you, you can't find a more respectable roomin' and boardin' house in all Hollywood."

"I've heard about your place," Chess said casually, as he followed the woman up the stairs. "From one of your former roomers, I believe. A fellow by the name of Pudkin."

"Yes, he roomed here about two years ago. He was one of them writers. Real quiet. Not like some of the other movie folks I had. He felt too good for the likes of them, I guess."

"You had other movie people here?" Chess asked, trying to lead the woman on.

"Yes, I always aim to cater to 'em. I've had some folks here that have become right famous, too. There's Jean Arrow and Graham Hall." As Chess looked puzzled, she demanded: "Didn't you ever hear of them? They're with the Rose Bower Company."

"The Rose Bower Company, did you say?" Chess pricked up his ears. "Were they here when Pudkin roomed with you?"

"Yes. And I had another one that became famous. Married a wealthy man for her second husband, she did."

"What was her name?" Chess asked, trying to make his voice sound casual.

"Her name? Maggie Dover."

This name meant nothing to Chess.

"I forgot what her name is since she married the last time. She's running the Rose Bower Company," the landlady went on.

"Not Spitz, is it?" Chess suggested.

The woman turned questioning eyes upon him and Chess realized that he had ventured too far. For some reason he could not understand, the woman was exceedingly prone to suspicion. He decided to change the subject quickly.

"And now, how about this room you were going to show me? I'd like to have the room Pudkin had."

"It's occupied," the landlady replied shortly. She gave Chess an appraising look. "I hope you're better pay than he was."

"Couldn't Pudkin pay his room rent?"

"No, and he went off without even giving me notice. Left his trunk here, too. His relatives finally paid me off to keep me from selling everything."

"What became of the trunk?"

"Say, young feller, it seems to me you're pretty curious. The trunk was taken to a storage house in Los Angeles."

Chess took a five dollar bill from his purse.

"Tell me why the trunk was taken to Los Angeles," he said, with a significant flourish of the bill.

The money had anything but the expected effect upon the woman. She stared at it hard, and a flush mounted her face. She looked at Chess with actual fear in her eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded hoarsely.

"A friend of Pudkin's."

"You're trying to get something on me," she charged.

Chess emphatically denied the accusation, but it was obvious that the landlady did not believe him.

"I don't know anything more than I've told you," she insisted stubbornly. "I can't be expected to know everything about my roomers."

Chess saw that it was useless to try to learn more, so took his leave. As he climbed into the roadster, he noticed that the woman was watching him from the front room.

Of one thing, Chess was certain, though he had no proof. He believed that Maggie Dover was none other than Mrs. Craven-Spitz. She had apparently recruited many of her actors from the boarding house crowd, and of course had known Pudkin when he roomed there.

"I've learned a lot of facts," Chess mused, "but it won't be easy to tie them up to anything definite. The next thing I must do is to go to Los Angeles and find out about that trunk."

It was already so late that a few moments of reflection convinced Chess that the trip must be postponed until another day.

"That trip may lead to definite proof, and again it may not," Chess told himself. "I'll just keep this entire matter under my hat until I am more certain that I am on the right trail. No use getting Ruth all excited if it turns out there's nothing to it. She has enough to worry her, as it is."

CHAPTER XVI

MORE HUMILIATION

"WELL, Chess, old man, how about it? Are you going to Oakmont with us?" Tom asked the question.

Since returning to Hollywood two days before, Ruth Fielding had given her company a much needed rest that they might be fresh for the important scenes which were to be taken on the college campus at Oakmont. The four of them, Ruth, Chess, Tom and Helen, were discussing plans for the trip at the dinner table.

Chess did not reply to Tom's question at once.

"What time shall I have to get up in the morning if I go?" he asked cautiously.

"Six," Ruth answered promptly. "We leave the studio at seven. I have already ordered the cars for that hour."

"That's too early for me," Chess protested.

"Oh, come on," Tom urged. "Just look what you missed on the last trip."

"I wouldn't have cared if I'd missed part of it," Helen put in quickly.

"Really, I don't believe I'll go," Chess said

seriously. "You see—well, I have business in Los Angeles."

"Oh—" Ruth emitted, and stopped. What had come over Chess, anyway? Was it possible he had quarreled with Helen? That seemed unlikely, for they appeared to be the best of friends, and Helen did not apparently feel that she was being neglected.

"You can depend on me to be Johnny on the spot for that mountain trip, though," Chess went on, fearing that his refusal to accompany Ruth's party to Oakmont had hurt his friends. "When will you shoot the mountain scenes, Ruth?"

"Just as soon as we get back from Oakmont."

Ruth did not allow herself to worry about Chess's strange actions, for she had enough worries of her own. Since she had returned to Hollywood, she found that wherever she went, she was pointed out as the woman who had figured in a newspaper scandal story.

The scenes which were to be taken at Oakmont were the most pretentious of the entire picture, and would of course cost the Alectrion Film Corporation a great deal of money, as many actors were to be used. Ruth had placed a call with a moving picture agency for over a hundred of her extras, and they had gone by train to Oakmont. The stars and those who had minor parts, were to go by automobile with Ruth.

Helen and Tom accompanied Ruth, for they

did not wish to miss the fun. Helen, who was eager to have the thrill of appearing before the camera, was to be in one of the mob scenes, and she was as excited as any extra.

Oakmont was reached without incident of any kind, and at eleven o'clock everything was ready and Ruth called for the action to begin. Ruth had discarded her megaphone and had substituted a telephone, by which means she would transmit her orders to assistants.

The first scene, which represented graduation exercises, went through without a hitch. The next scene was to be taken in the stadium, with a football game in progress.

The young director, sitting on a high platform where she could see everything, was at last satisfied that all was ready for the action to begin. Ten cameras were to be used, and it was essential that there be only one filming. Accordingly, as it appeared that all details of the picture were perfect, Ruth telephoned for the cameras to begin their work.

The director nodded her head in satisfaction as she watched the scene. At the critical moment in the football game the extras rose to their feet, shouted, tossed up their caps, and registered joy.

Suddenly, Ruth started. She could scarcely believe her eyes. One of the extras had left the stadium and had gone down to the front, in the

most conspicuous place. He staggered down to the fence, apparently trying to give an imitation of an intoxicated person.

Ruth snatched up her telephone. Not only had the extra disobeyed orders, but he had introduced something objectionable into her picture. Worse than that, he had taken the center of the picture, completely ruining the effect Ruth wished to gain.

"Stop cameras!" Ruth ordered curtly. "Get that man and bring him to me!"

It was with difficulty that Ruth held her temper when she faced the extra who had ruined the scene.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded.

For answer, the man gave her an insolent smile. Ruth had never seen him before, for he was one of the extras furnished her by the agency.

"You are fired," she told him sternly. "Don't let me see you around here again."

The extra slumped off without a word, and Ruth promptly forgot him. The scene was retaken and after that the work progressed. At one o'clock Ruth announced that a half hour would be taken for luncheon.

Ruth nibbled a sandwich as she studied the script. She was anxious to push the work through so that all the scenes at the college could be taken before the sunlight deserted them.

Helen and Tom had gone with the others to a restaurant, but Ruth had been too busy to accompany them.

Suddenly Ruth was startled to see Helen running toward her.

"Ruth! Ruth!" she cried.

"What in the world has happened?" Ruth dropped the script and sprang to her feet.

"Come quick!"

Ruth, thoroughly alarmed, hurried to meet her chum.

"What has happened?" she demanded a second time.

"That extra you discharged—" Helen panted for breath. "He didn't leave! He's fighting Fred Orman!"

"Where are they?"

"In a back lot near the restaurant. Tom is trying to stop them before the police get them."

"The police!" Ruth threw up her hands at the thought of another interruption to her picture and the scandal which would attend it.

She started off on a run toward the restaurant, leaving Helen to follow as best she could.

Slightly out of breath, Ruth reached the vacant lot. From a distance she had seen that Fred Orman, although the smaller of the two men, had already given the extra the beating of his life.

"I'm glad of that!" she thought. "That extra was nothing but a trouble maker!"

Tom and another member of Ruth's company had parted the two men, but it was with difficulty that they held Fred Orman.

"Let me go, I tell you!" he cried. "I'll show him he can't insult Miss Fielding and get away with it!"

Fred Orman broke away from those who held him captive and would have returned to the fight but the extra backed away and showed no signs of caring to finish it. Although he was nearly twice Orman's size, he was awkward and unskilled in boxing. Already bruised from the beating he had received, he was not eager for a second encounter.

"Fred Orman! What are you doing?" Ruth Fielding reached the scene, determined to end the fight. "Come here!"

Orman wheeled and faced Ruth. A flush mounted his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Miss Fielding." Orman knew only too well the ruling Ruth had made about fighting on the lot. He offered no excuses, but Tom made them for him.

"It wasn't his fault, Ruth. I saw this fellow spring on him first."

Ruth turned to the extra, and said in a cold voice.

"If I find you here in ten minutes, I'll report you to the police. You've caused enough trouble. Now leave!"

The extra slunk away. A few of the actors who had gathered to see the fight, openly hissed him.

Ruth called Fred Orman aside.

"Tell me," she directed in a low tone, "what the matter was."

"That fellow came around and tried to pick a fight with me, Miss Fielding. I stood it as long as I could, but when he said you were nothing but a plagiarist, I saw red. I said something back, and he sprang at me. You know the rest."

"It was all very unfortunate," Ruth sighed. "But of course I don't hold you responsible. Outsiders are so quick to criticise. Little incidents often give a company a black eye."

"I know," Orman admitted soberly. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help it."

"You say he deliberately came around after I had ordered him off the location and tried to start a fight?" Ruth mused thoughtfully.

"Yes, Miss Fielding. Do you want to know what I think?"

"Perhaps I think the same thing. I was wondering if it were possible that that extra had been hired for the purpose of causing trouble here to-day."

"I think he was, Miss Fielding. Something he dropped made me think he was a member of the Rose Bower Company."

"I didn't hire him myself," Ruth said slowly.

"He was secured through an agency. It would have been easy for Mrs. Spitz to have succeeded in getting one of her company here to try to break up our picture. He did ruin one scene, and I believe he hoped to disable you so that it would cause another delay."

"He didn't even scratch me," Orman declared, a little proudly.

"I'll take more care in selecting my extras after this," Ruth decided, as she left Orman. "Hereafter, I must use more caution than ever before. It's clear Mrs. Spitz will stop at nothing."

The incident troubled Ruth more than she allowed either Tom or Helen to suspect. She did not doubt that Mrs. Spitz would spread the news of the fight in Hollywood circles, probably distorting the entire story.

"At all events, I'll be in the mountains next week," Ruth thought. "Her gossip can't trouble me there. For a few days, I'll be free of Mrs. Craven-Spitz."

Ruth little dreamed of the sinister influence which was to follow her, even to the mountains.

CHAPTER XVII

INTO THE MOUNTAINS

"It's seven-thirty now. I'm afraid we'll have to start."

Ruth Fielding, who had been nervously pacing up and down, glanced at her watch and paused at the side of the automobile in which Tom and Helen were seated.

"I can't imagine what has happened to Chess," Tom said, with a worried frown. "He knew we were starting for the mountains to-day and he said when he left for Los Angeles that he expected to go along."

"Oh, dear, if anything has happened to him!" Helen fretted.

"There, dear, don't worry." Ruth patted her sister-in-law's hand comfortingly. "Chess is able to take care of himself. Probably his business detained him longer than he expected."

Helen gave Ruth a quick look, for she knew the nature of the business Chess had left to attend and the knowledge did not add to her peace of mind.

"We left a note at the bungalow telling him

where we were going," Tom added. "If he comes in to-day he can rent a car and follow us."

"It isn't fair to wait for him any longer," Helen agreed, as she glanced at the long row of cars which had been filled and ready to leave since seven o'clock.

Ruth gave the word to the other members of her company that they were ready to start. She then climbed into the roadster beside Tom and Helen. As soon as they were well out of Hollywood, Ruth settled herself to enjoy the ride.

"I'm free of that Mrs. Spitz for a few days at least," she declared. "I took pains to keep it rather quiet that we were leaving for the mountains to-day, so there's no chance that we shall be bothered by her or by any one else."

"Where are you planning to take the pictures?" Helen asked, studying a map of the mountain roads that Tom had before him.

"Most of the scenes are to be taken in and near a gorge I have in mind," Ruth answered. "I believe I have a picture of it."

She searched her pockets, and found a photograph which she showed to Helen.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Wonderful!" Helen breathed. "I had no idea there was such a place as that within riding distance of Hollywood. The waterfall is beautiful."

"If it's half as attractive as the photograph,

you'll have a real background for your scenes," Tom commented.

Ruth took a deep breath and surveyed the landscape.

"I can almost smell the pines now," she laughed. "I declare, I feel like a new person this morning."

"Everything is going to go perfectly to-day," Tom told her. "This trip will be a sort of rest cure for you."

"I hope so. I've been worried for so long that I need a good rest. The day at Oakmont nearly finished me."

"How did the scenes turn out?" Helen questioned curiously.

"Exceptionally well. I saw them flashed on the screen early this morning. I was well pleased."

"By the way, Ruth," Tom broke in as a sudden thought occurred to him. "I looked up that extra you discharged."

"What did you find out, Tom?"

"The agency had him recorded as an experienced actor, formerly with the Rose Bower Company."

"Formerly nothing!" Helen exclaimed sarcastically. "The Rose Bower Company hasn't been in existence a month yet. That Mrs. Spitz sent him to the agency with the deliberate intention

of having him get into Ruth's picture and ruining it."

"She certainly wants to ruin my picture, as well as my reputation," Ruth agreed.

"If everything goes well, the picture will be finished this week, won't it?" Helen asked.

"Yes. Three days should finish everything. These mountain scenes are the last on the schedule."

"They are the most dangerous scenes of the entire picture," Tom put in.

"Yes, they are," Ruth admitted. "I put them off until the last for that reason. I expect the next three days will be rather full of thrills."

"I wish Chess could have come along," Helen fretted. "He's missed most of the fun."

"Chess seems to have something on his mind," Tom said thoughtfully. "You two haven't quarreled, have you, Helen?"

"Quarreled?" Helen opened her eyes wide. "Well, I should say not! You should see him when you two aren't around."

"Oh, we hear you giggling on the davenport," Tom teased her.

"I don't giggle," Helen defended herself. "And what's more, Chess and I are very sensible."

Tom grinned.

"Well, we are!"

"I didn't say you weren't."

"Children!" Ruth protested laughingly. "You pick at each other like two roosters! Why don't you enjoy the scenery?"

By this time, they had reached the mountain road and were winding upward. Tom had taken the lead, and the roadster was followed by half a dozen other cars filled with members of the film company.

Although the way was steep, the road was graveled, and they made excellent progress. As Tom was a good driver, Ruth gave little thought to the road, but enjoyed the scenery to the fullest extent. More than once she breathed deeply of the fragrant air.

"You like it, don't you?" Helen asked, smiling.

"I love it!"

At eleven o'clock the entire company stopped at a roadside inn for luncheon. From there they left the graveled road and followed an even steeper dirt road, which would eventually bring them to the gorge. As before, Ruth's car took the lead.

"I don't—like this—a little bit," Helen emitted between jolts.

"Cheer up," Ruth comforted her. "Only about two more miles of this, and we'll be there."

"Two miles! Ye fishes! My anatomy won't hold together that far!"

The party moved slowly now, for the road was full of holes and ruts. The grade was steep, and proved a hard pull for many of the engines. The roadster, which was a high-powered car, gradually forged ahead, and, without realizing it, Ruth and her party were soon a considerable distance ahead of the other cars.

"I'd hate to meet any one on this road," Tom observed. "I don't believe two cars could pass."

"We're coming to the gorge now," Ruth cried. "Stop the car right here in the road, Tom. We'll get out and find a place to turn off and park the cars before the others get here."

Tom stopped the car and the three climbed out. Ruth eagerly led them across the road. They scrambled through an undergrowth of bushes and walked for perhaps a dozen yards.

"I can hear the waterfall!" Ruth cried.

A moment later she called out to Tom and Helen, who were a little way behind her.

"Here it is! Oh, it's more beautiful than the picture! It's gorgeous!" Ruth was as thrilled as any child.

Tom and Helen caught up with her, and they too exclaimed at the beauty of the gorge and the waterfall which tumbled into it.

"This will just make your picture, Ruth!" Tom said enthusiastically.

"Oh, I'm so glad we came to this place," Ruth went on. "We'll pitch camp near the waterfall,

too! Taking these scenes will be real pleasure, not work."

Almost regretful at leaving, the three turned back and slowly retraced their steps. As they parted the bushes at the roadside and emerged, they were startled to see that another automobile, coming from the opposite direction, had been parked so that it faced the roadster.

"Now what?" Tom asked, under his breath.

There were three men and a woman in the automobile. As their attention was attracted to Ruth and her friends, the woman stood up in the car and turned angry eyes upon them.

Ruth stopped in the roadway and stared. She could scarcely believe her eyes. The woman was Mrs. Craven-Spitz!

"Say, what do you folks mean by blocking the road with your car?" Mrs. Spitz cried. Then suddenly her eyes rested full on Ruth and she recognized her. "Ruth Fielding!" she shrieked angrily. "What are you doing on this location?"

CHAPTER XVIII

RUTH HOLDS HER OWN

"WHAT am I doing here?" Ruth Fielding repeated the question Mrs. Craven-Spitz had so angrily voiced. "I am attending to my own business!"

"Then, if you know what is good for you, you'll move on!" Mrs. Spitz climbed from the automobile and came at Ruth.

"I have no intention of moving on."

"You can't stay here, Ruth Fielding. I discovered this place myself, and I intend to have it!"

"Indeed?" Ruth said coolly. "Do you own the land?"

"No, I don't own the land, and neither do you."

"I happened to get here first, Mrs. Spitz, and possession is nine points of the law."

"You weren't here first. I found this place and went on up the mountain."

Ruth turned her back on Mrs. Spitz and called out to one of the men in the head car.

"Drive right in there! We'll pitch camp by the waterfall."

"I tell you, you can't have this location, Ruth Fielding!" Mrs. Spitz snapped. "I am going to use it for my own picture."

"You can use it—after we get through," Ruth retorted coldly.

"I have as much right to this place as you have."

"Oh, no, you haven't, Mrs. Spitz. I took the precaution to secure a permit to use the location. You're out of luck this time."

Tom and Helen, who were highly pleased at Mrs. Spitz' discomfiture, were suddenly startled to see her spring forward and catch Ruth by the arm.

"I'll show you, you insolent upstart!" the woman shrieked.

Tom sprang forward, and two men from the Rose Bower Company jumped out of the car.

"Let go of her, you fiend!" Tom shouted, catching hold of Mrs. Spitz and pulling her back.

As Mrs. Spitz struggled to free herself, the two men from the Rose Bower Company stepped forward and helped Tom hold her.

"Let go of me!" Mrs. Spitz yelled, twisting this way and that. "I'll fix her!"

"Better not threaten her," one of the men of the Rose Bower Company warned Mrs. Spitz. "It may work against you later."

This thought served to sober Mrs. Spitz somewhat, and she became quiet enough to be released. The two members of her company led her away to the car, but Mrs. Spitz could not resist one last retort before she left the scene.

"Just wait, Ruth Fielding! You aren't through with me!"

"The place for that woman is in jail!" Tom muttered under his breath.

"And I thought I would be free of her for a few days at least!" Ruth sighed, as soon as the car containing Mrs. Spitz had gone on. "I wonder what she will do next?"

"Who cares?" Tom asked. "She's nothing but a bluff. You held your own this time, Ruth."

Ruth tried to dismiss from her mind the unfortunate encounter with Mrs. Craven-Spitz, but found it impossible. She wondered if the woman would try to harm her.

"I'll take no chances," the young director decided. "It would be like her to try to steal our films, or something contemptible like that. I'll see to it that they're kept in a safe place."

Ruth turned her attention to making camp, for so many scenes were to be taken near the gorge that it would necessitate the company remaining in the vicinity for a number of days.

The party had brought with them tents, cooking utensils and everything necessary for comfortable camping. For most of the members of

the company, the work of making camp was a novel experience, but one they enjoyed to the utmost.

While camp was being made and Ruth and her friends settling themselves, they were watched curiously by an old man who had taken a seat on a rock near by.

"Who do you suppose that old fellow is?" Helen asked Ruth suspiciously. "He looks harmless, but he might be one of the Rose Bower Company."

Presently, the old man sauntered over to where Ruth was talking to Tom and Helen.

"Who's the boss of this outfit?" he asked abruptly.

Ruth admitted that she was in charge.

"Then let me give you a tip. You'd better pitch your camp on higher ground above this here waterfall."

"But why?" Ruth frowned, for the work of making camp was very nearly finished.

"You kin do as you like of course, ma'am; but I'm a tellin' you that when she rains in these here mountains, this gorge fills up like a rain barrel."

"But surely there won't be a hard rain this time of year!" Ruth half protested.

"You kin do as you like, but if you git drown, don't say you wasn't warned."

The old man shambled off leaving Ruth and the others to stare after him in wonder.

"Pooh!" Helen scoffed. "He's just a false alarm."

"I'm not so sure," Ruth returned thoughtfully. "He probably knows more about these mountains than we do."

"You aren't going to take his advice? Break up camp right after you've made it, are you?" Helen demanded, aghast.

"I believe it will be wiser. What do you think, Tom?"

"I think so too, Ruth. I've heard these mountain streams often go on the rampage. The question is, where can we camp? There isn't a very good place near."

"We might go up there," Ruth pointed to a place above the waterfall.

"In case of a flood, I wonder if we would be safe there?" Tom questioned.

"Possibly not. But at least we would have more time to get away."

Accordingly, Ruth issued orders that the camp was to be moved to higher ground. Groans and grunts of disgust followed the order, but Ruth calmly disregarded them.

In another hour the camp was moved, and as the fires were lighted, the members of the company once more regained high spirits. A supper of hot biscuits, fried fish and other things put every one in a good humor.

After supper the company gathered about a

huge fire to roast marshmallows and tell stories of thrilling experiences they had had in the moving picture business. Some one had brought a phonograph, and much to the enjoyment of the entire group, furnished music until it was time to retire.

Early the next morning every one was up ready for breakfast and eager for the work of the day. Ruth had just finished eating when Tom came and called her aside.

"I've been out scouting around a little, Ruth, and I'm afraid we're in for trouble."

"How is that?"

"Mrs. Spitz has located her camp below us a short distance. She came as near as she dared."

"That woman again?" Ruth's eyes narrowed. "I've stood about all I intend to from her. If she attends to her business, all well and good, but if she tries to bother me, I'll give her some of her own medicine."

"I feel sure she'll try to annoy us."

"So do I. I intend to hide the films in a safe place each night, so there will be no chance of having them stolen. I've tried to treat that woman decently, but I guess there are some people that won't let you do it."

"Mrs. Spitz doesn't deserve any consideration, Ruth. She located her camp near us for the purpose of making trouble for you. At least that is my opinion."

"I intend to keep my eyes open, Tom. I wonder what her next move will be?"

"It's hard to tell. I expect to stick pretty close to camp to-day, Ruth, and if any one comes prowling around, I'll be the official bouncer."

Tom kept his word, and all that day while Ruth directed the various scenes which were shot near the camp, he maintained a close watch. His vigil went unrewarded, for as far as he could tell, no one from the Rose Bower Company came near the camp.

Ruth trusted Tom to watch for prowlers, and devoted her entire attention to the work of the picture. One scene which had worried her a great deal was to be taken at the waterfall.

The script called for a thrilling scene. Bound hand and foot, the heroine was to be washed down the stream to the very brink of the fall.

It would have been an easy matter to use a dummy in the scene, but much of the realism would be lost if this were done. The water was shallow, but the stream was swift and filled with jagged rocks. Fortunately, the girl who was to double for the star, was an excellent swimmer, but nevertheless, it would be a dangerous undertaking.

Ruth had spent several sleepless nights trying to think of a way to make the scene realistic without endangering the life of the actress. At last she struck upon an idea which she thought would

work. After experimenting with a dummy, she was convinced that she had found the solution to her problem.

"You're sure that you are not afraid to try it?" she asked the extra who was to double for the star in this particular scene.

The girl assured her that she was not. Accordingly, her hands and feet were loosely bound, and she was thrown into the swift stream. She floated nearer and nearer the fall, struggling realistically before the camera.

The entire company of actors and actresses had gathered to watch the taking of the scene, and even the ones who were hardened to danger, were thrilled at the sight. Few of them knew the precaution Ruth had taken to make the scene a safe one.

Nearer and nearer the brink of the fall the girl approached. It seemed that she would certainly be dashed upon the rocks. To those who watched it seemed almost a miracle that she missed striking the rocks by a scant few inches. Although the camera recorded every expression of the girl's face, there was something that it did not show. That was the rope about the girl's waist, which was manipulated by two men behind a blind.

The two men had practiced with a dummy until they were certain they could manipulate the rope skillfully. As the girl floated down the

stream it was not difficult for them to guide her so that she avoided the rocks. At the very brink of the fall, the girl's progress was checked by means of the rope, and she was pulled back to safety.

From the standpoint of effect, the scene was one of the most thrilling Ruth had ever directed, although as she had accomplished it, the extra had been placed in no danger. The ropes which had guided her, were underwater, and consequently did not ruin the picture.

"I am well satisfied with the day's work," Ruth told Tom that night as they sat around the camp fire, "I can scarcely wait until I see the scene projected. If the weather stays good, I believe I can finish everything in a couple of days."

"Mrs. Spitz will have to go some if she beats you," Tom commented. "She was taking pictures farther down the gorge to-day, and I'll venture she'll move up here as soon as we leave."

"Let her. I'll defy her to duplicate the scene we took this afternoon."

While Ruth and Tom discussed the day's work, Helen, who sat near, made no effort to take part in the conversation. She remained so quiet that at last her preoccupation was noticed.

"What is the matter, dear?" Ruth asked quietly.

"Oh, nothing."

"Are you worrying about Chess?"

Helen nodded soberly.

"I suppose I am. I can't understand what has happened to him. I thought sure he would come to-day."

"I'm sure Chess is all right," Ruth tried to comfort her. "He probably got back to Hollywood after we left, and decided it wouldn't be worth while to follow us here. If when we get back home he isn't there, then it will be time to worry."

"I know you're right," Helen agreed slowly. "It's foolish to worry. I guess I'll go to bed and forget it."

Ruth, who had had an unusually hard day, was tired, and she too arose to retire.

"It looks as though it might rain," she observed as she glanced up at the sky. "I hope it stays clear for a while, because it's barely possible I can rush everything through to-morrow if the weather holds good."

One by one the actors and actresses deserted the fire and went to their respective tents. The fire burned lower and lower and at last went out, leaving the camp in darkness.

CHAPTER XIX

A NEW DANGER

It seemed to Ruth Fielding that she had been asleep but a few minutes when she was awakened by a crash of thunder. Getting up and going to the door of the tent, she looked out.

The camp fire had entirely died away, and everything was quiet. It was so dark that Ruth could not see a foot ahead of her, but as a flash of vivid lightning illuminated the sky, she saw the huge black rain clouds overhead.

A few large drops splashed down upon the tent.

"Oh, dear," Ruth thought. "I hope it doesn't rain hard. These tents will be a mess!"

Ruth glanced at Helen and Cora Brown who shared the tent with her. Both girls slept on, undisturbed by the knowledge of the approaching storm. Ruth securely fastened the flap of the tent and went back to her army cot.

Soon it began to rain. The drops pelted down upon the canvas, but fortunately the tent was a good one and it did not leak. The ground became a sticky mass of mud.

How long she remained awake, Ruth did not know, but presently she dropped off to sleep. When she awoke some time later, it was with a start, and a peculiar sensation of something wrong.

Ruth sat up in bed. It was no longer raining. She again glanced at the two cots near hers, but both girls were peacefully sleeping. Apparently they did not know that it had even rained.

Ruth started and strained her ears. What was that noise? She had never heard anything like it before. It was such an odd roar.

Yes, she had heard a noise very similar! It was when the flood waters of the Lumano River swept down upon the Red Mill!

The thought terrified Ruth. She remembered the warning that the old mountaineer had given her. He had advised her to pitch her camp on high ground.

Ruth jumped out of bed and dressed hurriedly. She put on an old pair of shoes and drew a slicker over her outside garments.

As she unbuttoned the tent flap and stepped out into a sea of mud, the roar came more distinctly to her ears. There was no mistaking it now. Unquestionably, it was the roar of water rushing down the mountain side.

Frightened, Ruth splashed her way toward the gorge. It was so dark that she could not tell

at first whether the camp was already flooded or whether the water underfoot came from the rain. As she approached nearer the gorge, the roar became louder.

As Ruth's eyes became accustomed to the dim light, she saw that the camp was not yet flooded, but that it probably would soon be. The water was coming in torrents down the gorge, rushing over the waterfall at a terrible rate. Ruth knew enough about mountain streams to realize that the rush would come quickly, sweeping all in its path. Evidently, the rain had been an extensive one.

Without wasting an instant, Ruth ran back to the tent.

"Helen! Quick! Wake up! Get up and dress just as quickly as you can!"

Ruth shook her chum frantically, and then turned to Cora Brown's cot.

Helen stirred sleepily in her cot, and opened her eyes.

"What did you say?" she asked dully.

"Get up before you drown! The camp is being flooded! There isn't a minute to waste!"

Helen, now awake, sprang from her cot. Certain that the two girls understood the need to hurry, Ruth dashed out of the tent to alarm Tom and the others. She went from tent to tent, awakening the occupants.

Soon the entire camp was alarmed. Confusion threatened, but Ruth took command of the situation.

"Keep calm, every one!" she ordered. "The camp is on high ground and will be safe for a few minutes. We will have plenty of time to move everything."

She organized the company into squads, for in this emergency the regular hands and the mechanics would need help. There was the utmost need for haste. To each squad was assigned a certain part of the work of moving the camp to higher ground. There was no need to tell the members of the company to hurry, for they worked like mad.

"What about the Rose Bower Company?" Tom asked Ruth tensely.

"That's right!" Ruth exclaimed. "I had forgotten. Their camp is below ours."

"They'll be flooded in no time."

"Can't we warn them?"

"Their camp is located back a way from the gorge. Perhaps I could get there and back before the water spreads."

"Try it, Tom. We can't let them drown in their beds without an attempt to save them, even if Mrs. Spitz is our enemy."

Tom bolted for the road, running as fast as he could. Ruth stared after him for a moment, as though she would have recalled him. Then

resolutely she turned back to her own camp.

The cameras, the tents, the cooking utensils, the costumes—everything was at last loaded into the automobiles and taken to higher ground. Every one fell to with a will, and by the time the water began to trickle over the spot where the camp had been, Ruth's company was safely established in a new camp.

Established was scarcely the word, for Ruth had never seen a more bedraggled group. Every one was muddy and wet, and it was impossible to light a fire or set up a tent.

"I'm certain we'll be safe here," Ruth declared as cheerfully as she could. "If we had remained where we were we would have been washed away."

As the minutes passed and Tom did not return, Ruth became increasingly anxious. The booming roar of the rushing water had a frightful sound.

Ever on the watch for realistic effects, she had suggested to the cameramen that a picture be taken of the flood as soon as it was dawn, but she could not give the matter serious thought until she knew that Tom was safe. She told herself that she should not have allowed him to leave.

Then a sudden cry went up in camp, as a muddy, water-soaked figure came into sight. It was Tom.

With a cry of joy and relief, Ruth ran to him and clung to his arm.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came, Tom! I was beginning to be afraid something had happened."

"Never thought I would make it in time, Ruth. The water rushed down the valley like a whirlwind. It spread over the lower region more quickly than I thought it would."

"But you got there in time?"

Tom nodded.

"Just in time. If I had been five minutes later, they couldn't have escaped. As it was, every one had to run for his life—including myself."

"Did they lose everything?"

"Just about."

"That will cripple the Rose Bower Company."

"I should say it will!" Tom grinned. "I guess we won't be bothered much by Mrs. Spitz from now on. If she stays around here, she'll have to go back to the city after more equipment. They saved the cameras and that was about all."

"Oh, Tom, we shouldn't gloat over their loss, even if Mrs. Spitz has acted contemptibly," Ruth chided.

"I think she deserved what she got," Tom insisted, with feeling. "You would have thought she would have thanked me for warning her of the flood."

"Didn't she?"

"I should say she did not!" Tom brought out

each word slowly and distinctly. "She bawled me out for not risking my life to save her old cameras. The next time her old camp can go to thunder for all I care!"

Although the water came higher, it did not reach the new camp, and for the time being, Ruth and her company were safe. At dawn fires were built and the tents were set up. The cameramen took a number of flood scenes which, Ruth decided, could be incorporated in her picture if they turned out well.

The sun came out brightly, and as was characteristic of mountain floods, the water vanished almost as quickly as it had come. After a hearty breakfast, every one became more cheerful. An inventory showed that everything had been saved from the flood. The work had been done rapidly, but systematically, and Ruth had been careful to see that nothing had been left behind.

"Maybe it wasn't lucky for us that we shot those waterfall pictures yesterday," Ruth laughed, as she stood with Tom on the high cliff looking down at the water which still rushed in a torrent down the gorge.

"Not much chance to take one there to-day," Tom returned, with a smile. "Your heroine wouldn't last long in that stream. With all that water pouring over it, the waterfall looks as formidable as Niagara."

"Fortunately, the scenes I planned to take to-

day can be shot near our present camp," Ruth went on. "If everything goes well, I expect to finish by four o'clock."

"You mean the entire picture will be finished?"

"Everything. My responsibility will be over then. The scenes will go to the assemblers and the title writers."

"Then you can take a rest."

"Yes. And I feel as though I need one. I want to go back to the Red Mill for a vacation. I want to see Aunt Alvirah and Uncle Jabez this summer. I'm afraid I can't, though. Not until—" she broke off.

"Not until you've attended to this Mrs. Spitz," Tom finished.

"Not until I've cleared my name, Tom. I've worked so hard to make it an honorable name, and now that this picture is almost finished, I intend to give myself no rest until I've proved to every one that I am not guilty of stealing another writer's plot!"

During the last few weeks, Ruth had labored under a terrific strain, although she had talked little of her worries. The mental anguish, combined with the hard work of pushing through "The Pride of Ardale" had had its effect upon her. Tired lines were beginning to show under her eyes.

"I wish you could go some place where it is quiet, and rest," Tom said tenderly. "You've

been working too hard these last few weeks."

"It isn't entirely the work, Tom. It's the worry as well. I only wish I could take a rest, but I'm afraid I can't."

"I know how you feel," Tom said soberly. "You want to clear your name before you even think of a vacation."

"Yes, and for that reason I am anxious to get back to Hollywood. Helen is in a hurry to go back too. She's worried about Chess."

"Why do you think he failed to show up, Ruth? He said he would take this trip with us."

"I know. It's beyond me."

"Does it strike you that Helen knows something she is keeping to herself?" Tom suggested.

"Yes, it does, Tom. I can't help but think she knew why he went to Los Angeles. And the knowledge doesn't seem to add to her peace of mind. The sooner we get back to Hollywood, the better Helen will feel. To tell the truth, I'm beginning to worry about Chess myself."

"So am I."

"I keep telling myself we'll find him when we get back home."

"I think we will," Tom said easily, but his mind was not as much at rest as he would have Ruth believe.

CHAPTER XX

THE LAST DAY

In spite of the delay caused by the flood, Ruth Fielding had her cameras set up by eleven o'clock. It had not been easy to arouse her company to working pitch, for every one was tired and uncomfortable.

However, a warm breakfast had done wonders for the actors, and the fact that it was the last day in camp made it easier for some to work. Now that the picture was so nearly finished, every one was eager to return to the city, some to sign contracts for new pictures, some to go on vacations.

"When do you think we can get away?" Tom asked Ruth.

"If everything goes well I hope to take the last scene by four o'clock. We'll break camp as soon after that as possible."

"I'll see to it that the cars are loaded and ready to go," Tom promised. "We should be in Hollywood by nine o'clock to-night, I should think."

Fortunately for Ruth's plans, only a few

scenes remained to be taken, and these were to be shot near the present camp. The actors and actresses threw themselves into the work, and never did rehearsals go so smoothly. By four o'clock the last scene had been taken to Ruth's complete satisfaction.

As she dismissed her company for the last time, Ruth was almost regretful, although she realized that there would be other pictures to come. She tried to make her voice steady as she turned to the group of faithful workers.

"I guess this is all—until the next picture," she said unevenly. "I want to thank you all for the way you have worked—and, for the way you've stood by me—when—when—" she broke off, and finished. "I appreciate it more than you will ever know."

They cheered her. Ruth, touched at the way her little speech of farewell had been received, turned away so that they might not see the tears in her eyes. Never would the members of her company realize just what this moment meant to her!

"They actually believe in me," she whispered to herself. "It's good to know that I have a few faithful friends."

After that good-byes were hurriedly said.

"Of course I'll see you all in Hollywood," Ruth promised.

Fred Orman seemed the most regretful at

leaving, but he brightened when Ruth told him that she would probably have another picture for him soon.

One by one the automobiles left, but Ruth, Tom, and Helen, of course, were to remain until the others had gone.

"I'd like to walk up to that cliff before we leave," Ruth said to Tom. "I've wanted to do it ever since we came, and I never had time."

"Don't ask me to go with you," Helen put in quickly. "I couldn't climb that far if I wanted to, and I don't want to."

"All right, I'll go alone then," Ruth laughed. "I know perfectly that Tom doesn't want to make the climb."

"Take care not to fall," Tom warned anxiously. "The path is steep."

"I'll be careful," Ruth promised.

"I'm not sure that it's safe for you to go alone," Tom went on. "I think I'd better——"

"Oh, it's safe enough," Ruth interrupted. "Mrs. Spitz is probably in Hollywood by this time, and, anyway, I'm not afraid of her."

"Just the same, Ruth, she's a dangerous woman."

"I'll be very careful, Tom," and Ruth smiled, for it pleased her that Tom was anxious. "And I'll be back here safe and sound in a few minutes. I only want to get the view from the top of the cliff. I'll be back in twenty minutes."

Gaily, Ruth began her long climb. The picture was finished and she felt freer than she had for many a day.

"I must think of some way to combat Mrs. Spitz," she told herself. "I have allowed the matter to drift along too long now. Already the newspaper stories and the rumor have hurt my reputation. If I do not clear my name before 'The Pride of Ardale' is released, the story may hurt Mr. Hammond's picture."

At last, after ten minutes of steady climbing, she paused for a moment's rest. From where she stood, she commanded a full view of the top of the cliff.

Presently Ruth was startled by a shrill scream which pierced the air. It was a woman's voice.

Ruth turned toward the cliff and her heart caught in her throat at the sight before her eyes. Above her, supported only by a slender tree branch to which she clung for dear life, a woman hung suspended over the very edge of the cliff!

Tired as she was from the rapid climb, Ruth hurried forward. As she ran, a second cry for help reached her ears.

CHAPTER XXI

TO THE RESCUE

"HELP! Help!" the wild cry rang out.

"Hold on!" Ruth Fielding shouted, as she scrambled over the rocks. "I'm coming!"

The bushes and briars tore Ruth's dress and slashed her arms, but she did not heed it. She reached the top of the cliff, and for the first time caught a full glimpse of the woman who had slipped over the edge.

Involuntarily, Ruth stopped short. The woman was Mrs. Craven-Spitz!

Only an instant did the young director pause, for Mrs. Spitz was indeed in a perilous position. Apparently, she had accidentally slipped over the edge of the cliff, but had saved herself by catching hold of a slender tree branch. The branch bent under her weight, and threatened at any moment to break and drop her down upon the rocks several hundred feet below.

As Ruth ran toward her, Mrs. Spitz struggled and tried to regain a foothold, but without success. The tree limb creaked threateningly.

"Save me! Save me!" Mrs. Spitz shrieked.

With disregard for her own safety, Ruth came to the edge of the cliff. She tried to reach Mrs. Spitz, but failed.

"I can't hold on much longer!" Mrs. Spitz gasped.

It was apparent that Mrs. Spitz was nearly exhausted. Ruth realized that she must work fast, or it would be too late.

Grasping a slender tree branch, she leaned far out over the cliff, and with her free arm, caught the limb to which Mrs. Spitz clung helplessly.

By sheer force, she drew the limb toward her until Mrs. Spitz could get a foothold on a ledge of the cliff. Then, grasping the woman firmly with her right hand and still clinging to the tree branch with her left, Ruth pulled with all her might.

For a moment it seemed as though Mrs. Spitz would take Ruth with her over the cliff. The frightened woman let out another wild cry of horror.

"Stop yelling, and try to help!" Ruth gasped.

Ruth braced herself against a boulder, let loose of the tree and extended both arms to Mrs. Spitz. The woman was afraid to let go of the branch, although her feet were now on a shelf-like projection below Ruth.

"Let go, and trust to me!" Ruth commanded.

The branch creaked again, and as it threatened to snap, Mrs. Spitz chose what she considered the

lesser of two evils, and grasped Ruth's arms. Ruth was a strong, athletic girl, but the hard pull was almost more than she could stand. It seemed that her arms would snap under the weight.

To abandon Mrs. Spitz to her fate never once entered Ruth's mind. Though she considered the woman an enemy, she would never desert her at a time like this.

As Ruth exerted all her strength and threw every ounce of her weight into the battle, Mrs. Spitz was slowly raised to the top of the cliff. With a last supreme effort, Ruth pulled her to safety.

Without getting to her feet, Mrs. Spitz began to cry out hysterically. Ruth, tired nearly to the point of exhaustion, had dropped down on a boulder.

"I'm hurt!" Mrs. Spitz cried. "I can't walk!"

Ruth got up and went to the woman.

"Which foot is it, Mrs. Craven-Spitz?" she asked, not unkindly.

"My left one," Mrs. Spitz groaned. "I was just out for a walk. I went too near the cliff. My foot caught on a rock and I twisted it and went over!"

Ruth said nothing, but leaned down to examine the injured foot. She knew that Mrs. Spitz had not indulged in a walk merely for the exercise. This particular cliff afforded an excellent view of the Alectrion Film Corporation camp, and

Ruth did not doubt that Mrs. Spitz, in spying upon it, had ventured too near the edge.

Carefully, Ruth felt of the injured foot, but although it was swollen, she could locate no bones out of place.

"Try to step on it," she advised.

Mrs. Spitz obeyed, but groaned at each step.

Satisfied that Mrs. Spitz was more frightened than hurt, Ruth again sank down on the cliff to rest.

"Aren't you going to do anything for me?" Mrs. Spitz cried. "Will you leave me here a hopeless cripple?"

With a weary sigh, Ruth arose.

"Your foot is only sprained," she said coolly, for she was not pleased at the way Mrs. Spitz had addressed her. "But if you want me to, I'll tie it up."

It seemed to Ruth that Mrs. Spitz might at least thank her for the risk she had taken in saving her life, but the woman uttered no word of gratitude.

Ruth ripped a long strip from her skirt and deftly bound the foot and ankle.

"There!" she announced, when she had finished. "That's the best I can do without equipment."

"It's a clumsy bandage."

Ruth stared open-mouthed.

"Is that all the thanks I get for saving your life?"

"You didn't save my life. I was pulling myself up when you happened along."

Ruth turned her back on the woman and started away.

"Where are you going?" Mrs. Spitz shrieked. "Don't you dare leave me alone!"

Ruth paused, and looked back over her shoulder.

"I'll send some one up after you."

The woman was able to walk, Ruth knew, but angry as she was at her ingratitude, she would not fail to report the matter and send help.

As Ruth spoke, she heard a noise below her and turned her head to see two men coming up the path. She did not know them, but she thought they were members of the Rose Bower Company. She had noticed few persons in the locality who were not connected with either her own or the rival company.

Ruth called to them.

"A woman has been hurt," she explained when they came up to her. "Will you help her down the mountain?"

"Certainly," one of the men replied. "Who is she?"

"Mrs. Craven-Spitz, who is directing the Rose Bower Company."

"You don't say?" Both men stared at Ruth. "We told her she'd get hurt coming up here all the time, but she would do it."

They went on up the cliff to where Mrs. Spitz sat, and Ruth turned away.

"Stop her!" Mrs. Spitz cried. "Don't let her get away!"

Ruth wheeled and looked at Mrs. Spitz in utter astonishment.

"She pushed me off the cliff!" Mrs. Spitz told the two men excitedly.

"What?" Ruth gasped, unable to believe her ears.

"She's always threatened me, but I never thought she would try to do this," Mrs. Spitz elaborated her story, growing more excited as she progressed. "She sneaked up behind me and pushed me off. I saved myself by catching hold of that limb!"

Mrs. Spitz pointed to the limb which gave evidence of the struggle. It was denuded of leaves.

The men stared at it as though it were proof enough of Mrs. Spitz' preposterous story.

"So you tried to push her over, did you?" one of the men demanded, with an ugly smile. "You can't get away with that, you know."

"I didn't do any such thing!" Ruth protested.

"She did too!" Mrs. Spitz cried.

"Of course I can't expect members of your company to believe my word against yours," Ruth said angrily to Mrs. Spitz. "I should think you would be ashamed of your ingratitude. The next time, I'll let you save your own life!"

Mrs. Spitz broke into laughter.

"Save my life! She tried to kill me, and she says I'm not grateful to her!"

Ruth started to walk away, her anger almost beyond control. One of the men sprang toward her and gripped her arm in a cruel grasp.

"Let loose of me!" and Ruth tried to free herself.

"Oh, no, you don't, young lady," the man clutched her arms so hard that Ruth winced with pain.

"I tell you, I didn't push her off the cliff!" Ruth protested earnestly. "Why, the entire story is preposterous!"

"Aren't you her rival in moving pictures?" she was asked.

Ruth was tempted to smile in spite of the serious situation in which she was now placed.

"I didn't know I was considered in that light," she said.

"You're jealous of her," she was informed by the man who held her, "and there isn't much a woman won't do to another one when she's jealous."

"Jealous?" Ruth demanded. "Of what, pray?"

"She's afraid I'll push her out of the moving picture business," Mrs. Spitz answered.

Ruth laughed, for the ridiculousness of it all temporarily overshadowed the rest.

"I've had enough of this silly business," she

snapped. "I'll thank you to take your hands off me, and let me go."

"Not much we won't, little lady. You're going to jail where you can't push any more folks off cliffs."

"I'm not guilty, and you can't arrest me. You haven't any warrant."

The two men were somewhat taken back at this, but only for a moment.

"We don't need a warrant. You were caught in the act."

Ruth's eyes opened wider. These two men were henchmen of Mrs. Spitz, and it was clear to Ruth that in court they would swear to their employer's story. She was a victim of a plot.

Never before had Ruth Fielding been in such a serious position. She thought fast. If these men succeeded in taking her to the city, she would have little chance to prove her innocence. She must try to free herself!

Frantically, Ruth began to struggle. She jerked her arm loose, but the other man caught her and pushed her cruelly backward.

CHAPTER XXII

A RESCUER

"LET go of that girl's arm!"

As the masculine voice boomed out the command, the two men who held Ruth Fielding wheeled about to see who it was that had appeared in the pathway.

In relief, Ruth too turned and saw her rescuer.

"Tom!" she cried. "Oh, Tom, I'm so glad you came!"

Tom ran to her, roughly thrusting aside the two men who were in his way. He caught Ruth in his arms and held her close.

"Tell me what all this means, Ruth."

"They're trying to hold me a prisoner."

"We have a right to hold her," one of the men put in angrily. "She tried to murder Mrs. Spitz!"

"It's a lie!" Tom's fists clenched.

"It isn't a lie. She sneaked up behind Mrs. Spitz and tried to push her over the cliff."

"There's not a word of truth in it!" Tom retorted angrily. "Miss Fielding wouldn't be guilty of a thing like that."

"Whether you believe it or not, she's going to jail." One of the men again placed his hands on Ruth's arm.

Tom approached him menacingly.

"Take your hands off my wife and leave them off if you know what is good for you!"

Something in Tom's voice made the two men hesitate. They glanced at Mrs. Spitz as though for instructions.

"Don't let him bluff you!" Mrs. Spitz cried.

Just then there was a noise in the bushes, and a moment later three strangers appeared. They had been attracted to the cliff by the sound of angry voices.

Ruth believed they were members of the Rose Bower Film Company also, and her heart sank. She brightened a little when she caught sight of another figure hurrying up the path.

It was Helen. She had started with Tom to climb the cliff to find Ruth when she had failed to return in the specified twenty minutes. They had heard angry shouts and the heated conversation. Tom had dashed on ahead to find out what was happening, leaving Helen to follow as fast as she could.

Helen reached the cliff, excited and out of breath.

"What in the world is going on here?" she demanded.

"Oh, Helen," Ruth half-groaned, "they're try-

ing to arrest me for something I never did."

"Arrest you?" Helen ran to her chum and threw her arms about her protectingly. "What for?"

"For trying to push that woman over the cliff!" one of the men answered.

Helen glared at Mrs. Spitz and then at the two men who had turned against Ruth.

"That woman ought to be pushed off a cliff!" she snapped. "She's nothing but an old trouble maker!"

"Helen," Ruth begged, "please don't. You only make matters worse."

For the benefit of the newcomers who proved to be members of the Rose Bower Company, the story was repeated. This time Mrs. Spitz elaborated upon it. Others came, and they, too, were made acquainted with the so-termed facts.

Ruth was quick to notice the glances that were cast upon her, and she realized that it would do little good to try to defend herself. Never had things looked blacker for her. Of the entire group, only Tom and Helen believed in her, and of course their word would count no more heavily than her own.

To make matters worse, the two men declared that they had caught Ruth in the very act, and so often did they repeat the story that they apparently came to believe it themselves.

"It's a deliberate frame-up," Tom insisted.

"Why, only this morning Ruth sent the Rose Bower camp warning of the flood," Helen put in.

This seemed to impress the group somewhat, but the favorable feeling was entirely destroyed by Mrs. Spitz.

"Yes, she did send me warning!" Mrs. Spitz said sarcastically. "She deliberately withheld the knowledge until she knew it would be too late for us to save anything. We were lucky to escape with our lives."

"Arrest her!" some one cried, and the others began to nod their approval.

Hopelessly discouraged, Ruth dropped down upon a log. She was at the mercy of Mrs. Craven-Spitz and her followers. There was nothing that she could say, nothing that she could do. The members of her own company who might have stood by her were on their way to Hollywood by this time. Tom and Helen were the only friends near, and although Ruth knew they would fight for her to the last, they would have little chance against such great odds.

Ruth saw that Mrs. Spitz had tricked her. She had risked her own life, only to have the woman turn upon her. Ruth's generosity had been her undoing.

"Well, there's no use standing around here," one of the men began. "The quicker we get this girl to town, the better." He turned to Ruth.

"Young lady, if you know what is good for you, you had better come quietly."

Before Ruth could reply or Tom could interfere there was another interruption. Three men suddenly stepped into the clearing.

"Just a minute!"

The words were as an electric shock to the crowd. The very tone of the voice seemed to tell Ruth that here at last were friends who could help her.

She wheeled about quickly as did the others and faced Chess Copley and two strangers.

"Chess!" Ruth cried joyously.

Helen echoed the cry.

"Old man, you came just in time!" Tom exclaimed. He knew that if there was no other way to save Ruth, Chess could be depended upon to put up a gallant fight.

"What's wrong?" Chess demanded, with a quick glance from one to another.

He was told of the accusation.

"What?" Chess and the two strangers who were with him exchanged significant glances.

Something about the expression on the faces of the three newcomers made Mrs. Craven-Spitz nervous. She arose from where she was sitting and, with an exaggerated limp, began to hobble away.

"Don't let her get away!" Chess cried.

"I'll leave if I want to!" Mrs. Spitz retorted.

"Oh, no, you won't." Chess placed a detaining hand on her arm. "I have a few questions I want to ask you. But first, we'll straighten out this accusation you have made against Miss Fielding."

Chess turned to the two strangers who had accompanied him.

"These men are forest rangers," he explained for the benefit of the entire group. "They have a story to tell which I believe will clear Miss Fielding beyond a shadow of doubt. Bill, will you tell the crowd what you saw?"

The man thus addressed nodded his head.

"Sure! We forest rangers haven't any ax to grind. We don't know either one of these women, but we believe in fair play."

The forest ranger was so obviously open and frank that it was apparent to Ruth that his word was likely to be accepted.

"My partner and I were scouting for fires as usual," the ranger went on, with a glance in the direction of Mrs. Spitz. "We were on the other side of the gorge, but in such a position that we commanded a good view of this cliff.

"We noticed a woman standing near the edge of the cliff. Of course, we couldn't tell who she was that far away, but she wore a blue dress." Every one looked at Mrs. Spitz and saw that her dress was of that color. "I said to my partner, 'that woman will fall if she isn't careful.'

"I hadn't any more than finished saying it when she did slip and fall. She caught hold of a tree branch and managed to hang on. We started over this way, but we knew we couldn't make it in time to save her. If it hadn't been for that girl in the white dress, she'd have gone over the cliff, sure!"

Now all eyes were turned upon Ruth, for the ranger's story had put everything in a new light.

"Ruth saved her?" Tom asked eagerly.

"Right she did! At the risk of her own life! It took real courage and strength to pull that woman back to safety, but we watched her do it!"

"Ruth!" Helen cried in delight. "I knew you weren't guilty, Ruthie!"

Chess grinned with satisfaction.

"You haven't heard all of it yet," he declared.

"The whole story is trumped up!" Mrs. Spitz insisted.

She turned from one to another of the group, but now she was eyed with suspicion rather than pity, even by the members of her own company. The two men who had supported her story and had declared that they had arrived in time to witness Ruth's act, were also regarded with scorn.

"The story is true," the forest ranger went on quietly. "But I won't ask you to take my word for it without proof. After the woman had been pulled back to safety, it appeared that her foot had been injured in the fall. Anyway, this

girl wrapped up her ankle with a piece of cloth torn from her own skirt."

Mrs. Spitz realized that she was now beaten, for all eyes turned automatically to her injured foot and the telltale bandage.

"Certainly that's true enough," said one man, noting Ruth's torn skirt.

"Ruth Fielding never touched my foot," Mrs. Spitz offered in one last feeble defiance. "I wrapped it up myself."

"Such ingratitude!" some one murmured.

"You had better admit that you slandered Miss Fielding," Chess said warningly. "It will go easier with you."

Mrs. Spitz hesitated. The faces of those about her told her that already she was discredited.

"Well, what if I did say it?" she sputtered angrily. "Ruth Fielding doesn't deserve any consideration. She's a plagiarist, anyhow! She stole a scenario!"

Chess stepped forward and looked the woman squarely in the face.

"That is another matter that you and I are going to settle—right now!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TABLES TURN

MRS. CRAVEN-SPITZ took a step backward at Chess Copley's words and flung up her hands as though to ward off a blow.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"You'll soon find out, Maggie Dover!" and Chess smiled meaningly.

As this name was flung at her so unceremoniously, Mrs. Spitz went as limp as a rag and all color faded from her face. For years she had believed that her former name and everything associated with it had been forgotten.

"You are going with me back to Hollywood," Chess told her, with a hard glint in his eyes.

"Hollywood?" Mrs. Spitz gasped.

"Yes, back to your old boarding house."

"I don't know what boarding house you mean."

"Oh, yes, you do," Chess insisted. "You lived there when you were known as Maggie Dover. That was before you married and acquired a nodding acquaintance with respectability."

Mrs. Spitz looked into the hostile faces of

those about her. Suddenly, she wheeled and plunged through the bushes.

"Stop her!" Helen cried, and the others took up the shout.

Chess and the forest rangers went in pursuit. They returned almost immediately with the struggling Mrs. Spitz. Crippled as she was with a slightly sprained foot, it was impossible for her to get away.

The tables had now turned. Even the members of the Rose Bower Company crowded about Ruth Fielding and praised her for her courage in saving Mrs. Spitz. The two members of the company who had supported Mrs. Spitz' story slunk away, and no one tried to detain them.

"If I had known she was like that I would never have worked for her," one of Mrs. Spitz' company said. "Her picture is a frost anyway, and it will be lucky for her if it's never released."

While the two rangers watched Mrs. Spitz to see that she did not leave, Chess called Ruth, Tom, and Helen aside.

"Tell us all about it," Helen begged, as soon as they were out of hearing distance of the others.

"There isn't time now, Helen. I'll explain everything on the way back to Hollywood. To tell you the truth, folks, I'm putting up a sort of bluff."

"Bluff?" Ruth cried. "Then you mean—you

haven't any proof of my innocence? I thought——"

"Wait a minute," Chess said gently, as he saw that Ruth was upset. "I said I haven't any proof, but I think I will have when I get back to Los Angeles. I've tracked down a good many clues during the last few days, and in my own mind I'm satisfied that Mrs. Spitz is at the bottom of everything."

"I know she is," Ruth declared bitterly.

"I think I shall have absolute proof of it. But, as I said, I can't be certain until I get to Los Angeles. We can't let Mrs. Spitz get away. I have her pretty well bluffed already I think, and I am hoping that she will confess when we take her to the boarding house at Hollywood."

"We don't know what you're talking about," Tom protested. "We're still in the dark."

"There's no time for the story now. We won't reach Hollywood before ten o'clock to-night unless we hurry."

The four joined the others. Then, against her will, Mrs. Spitz was led down the slope and to a waiting automobile. The two forest rangers had promised to accompany Chess to Hollywood, and if necessary give evidence against Mrs. Spitz.

Chess, Tom, Helen, and Ruth all crowded into the roadster, and the rangers took charge of Mrs. Spitz and followed in another car.

"Now tell us everything," Helen begged, as

soon as Tom had started the automobile and they were well on their way toward the city.

"Well, you knew why I went to Los Angeles in the first place, Helen," Chess began. "I had located a boarding house in Hollywood where Mrs. Spitz once lived. This man Pudkin, who is supposed to have written the scenario, 'Storm Tossed,' also lived there."

"You think Pudkin and Mrs. Spitz combined to frame Ruth?" Tom questioned, for his mind had traveled ahead of the story Chess was telling.

"No. I am convinced that Pudkin had nothing to do with the plot. He was just a struggling writer who happened to fit into Mrs. Spitz' plans. Well, to go on, I found out that after Pudkin's death his personal belongings had all been sent to a Los Angeles warehouse."

"That was why you went to Los Angeles?" Ruth asked.

"Yes, I didn't want to tell you until I was certain I had unearthed something worth while," Chess explained. "I thought it would only stir up hope. But now I feel certain I can prove that you are innocent of plagiarism."

"Oh, if you only can!" Ruth breathed.

"How did you get the address of the Los Angeles warehouse?" Tom asked curiously.

"I didn't. That was what caused most of the trouble. You see, the woman who ran the board-

ing and rooming house in Hollywood acted rather suspiciously. She wouldn't tell me very much, and of course I didn't learn the address of the warehouse.

"When I set off for Los Angeles, I thought it would be a simple matter to locate the right one, but I found that it was difficult to do. I went from one storage house to another, and it took forever to go through the records. Finally, the second day, just when I was about ready to give up, I located the right one.

"Pudkin's trunks had been stored there for a good many months. I wanted to investigate them, but of course I ran up against a wall there."

"Why?" Helen wanted to know.

"Storage houses have rules to the effect that they won't show goods without a written order. Of course Pudkin was dead, so I couldn't get his signature."

"I suppose his relatives had charge of the trunks," Ruth said thoughtfully.

"Yes. But how was I to know who his relatives were? The telephone directory was loaded down with Pudkins. I think I called them all before I found the right party."

"Poor Chess," Helen sympathized.

"Poor Chess is right! I had one heck of a time of it. That was why I didn't get back in time to go with you to the mountains. I was warm on the trail, and I wanted to learn

everything I could while I was in Los Angeles."

"We'll forgive you for not showing up," Tom declared promptly.

"Well, after I found the relatives of Pudkin, we went to the storage house and opened the trunks."

"What did you find?" Ruth leaned forward eagerly.

Chess groaned.

"Manuscripts and manuscripts and manuscripts. All rejected and all equally worthless. I never waded through such a mess in my life."

"Did you find the original of 'Storm Tossed?' "

"Yes, Ruth, I did."

"Did it read similar to my scenario."

Chess nodded.

"It did, I'm sorry to say."

"Then matters only look worse than ever for me."

"No, they don't, Ruth. I haven't finished the story yet, by a long sight. At first I thought just as you now do—that I had only uncovered unfavorable evidence. Then, as I studied the manuscript more carefully, I noticed something odd."

"What was that?" Helen demanded.

"The handwriting was slightly different."

"None of the manuscripts were typewritten?" Ruth questioned wonderingly.

"No. Pudkin evidently couldn't type himself and couldn't afford to have his manuscripts copied. 'Storm Tossed,' on first inspection, appeared exactly as the other manuscripts, but when I studied the writing under a microscope, I saw the difference at once."

"The manuscript had been written by some one else!" Ruth cried triumphantly.

"Not the entire manuscript. Only passages. The storm scene and a number of others—the ones that resembled the scenes in your prize scenario—had been added. It was easy to see that some sort of liquid ink eraser had been used to remove Pudkin's writing. Then this other person had forged his handwriting and had copied in the passages. It really was a clever idea, though a crude piece of work."

"Then you have proved that Mrs. Spitz really—" Ruth began but broke off as Chess interrupted.

"Not yet. I took the manuscript to a handwriting specialist for analysis. He agreed with me that the various passages had been written in by some one other than Pudkin, but until I secure a copy of Mrs. Spitz' handwriting, I can't be sure."

"That should be easy," Tom declared.

"Yes, we'll get a sample of her writing to-night, but I want to take her to Los Angeles and confront her with the evidence."

"But I thought you said we were going to a boarding house in Hollywood," Helen protested, for it appeared to her that Chess's story did not hang together.

"We are going there first. I got a little ahead of my story. You see, I located an actor who lives there and who knows considerable about Mrs. Spitz. If he doesn't go back on his word, he'll have a story to tell."

Chess was besieged with questions and he did his best to answer them all as the car sped down the mountain road. The party made good time, nevertheless they reached Hollywood rather later than they had expected.

Chess gave Tom the address of the rooming house, and they went at once to it. The car containing the rangers and Mrs. Spitz followed and parked near Ruth's roadster.

Mrs. Spitz protested that she would not enter the house, but her protest was only a feeble one, for she realized that she could gain nothing by refusing.

Chess rapped on the door. There was a little wait, and then the landlady that Chess had previously met opened the door. She looked startled, as she saw the group and her eyes fell upon Mrs. Spitz.

"Maggie Dover!" she exclaimed. "I told you we'd get into trouble!"

"Keep still!" Mrs. Spitz hissed. "You silly

fool! Do you want to give everything away?"

The landlady would have then closed the door upon them, but Chess thrust his foot across the threshold. He entered, and the others followed.

"Wait a minute until I call a fellow that rooms here," Chess said, as he darted up the stairs.

He knocked at one of the doors, and a moment later came down stairs with the man of whom Chess had told the others.

"Tell these folks what you told me," Chess charged the actor.

"There isn't a great deal to tell. I knew that woman when she stayed here a number of years ago. Maggie Dover we called her then. I had forgotten all about her until she came here one day not long ago."

"How long ago would you judge?" Chess asked him.

"Well, I can't say exactly. Probably a little over a month ago. Perhaps not that long."

Ruth looked pleased.

"That was about the time I started work on the college picture."

"There's nothing the matter with me coming here if I choose!" Mrs. Spitz broke in scornfully. "You can't prove anything by that!"

Chess ignored Mrs. Spitz. He directed the actor to go on with his story.

"The landlady's room is next to mine, you know, and without intending to listen, I heard

some of what went on, though I didn't know what it meant at the time."

"What?" Mrs. Spitz cried.

"I couldn't make out exactly what it was all about, but Maggie Dover was evidently trying to persuade the landlady to give her a key to something—a trunk I thought it was. I judged that the landlady had secured the key in some underhanded way——"

"That isn't true!" the landlady interrupted furiously. "I found the key here after Pudkin left!"

"Keep still!" Mrs. Spitz hissed again. "You'll land us both in jail with your crazy tongue!"

"That's all I know," the actor finished. "Maggie Dover evidently got what she wanted, because she went away in high spirits."

"I didn't get anything," Mrs. Spitz insisted. "It was merely a friendly visit."

Chess now turned to his friends.

"What do you say?" he asked. "Shall we go on to Los Angeles and finish everything up, or shall we wait until to-mororw."

"Oh, let's go on to Los Angeles," Ruth cried. "I'll never rest until I prove my innocence."

"We don't care if we are up most of the night," Tom added.

"You will come with us," Chess said to the landlady.

"Me? I ain't done nothin'!"

"That remains to be seen."

"I won't go."

"Then we will call the authorities. We have enough evidence now to put you behind bars."

The landlady cringed.

"Don't call the police. I'll go."

The two women were escorted to the waiting automobiles by the rangers who had agreed to continue with the party as far as Los Angeles.

"Do you think there is any danger they may try to escape?" Ruth asked anxiously.

"They can't get away—not with those two rangers watching them," Chess declared.

The rooming house landlady submitted without further protest, but Mrs. Spitz stormed angrily as she was forced into a seat between the two rangers.

"You'll pay for all this, Ruth Fielding!" she snarled. "You haven't proved anything yet—and you won't!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A NIGHT RIDE

As THE roadster raced over the smooth road toward Los Angeles, Ruth Fielding leaned back against the cushions and tried to relax. It was not the work of finishing up the last scenes of the college picture that had tired her, but the strain of the ordeal she had passed through during the unfortunate happening on the cliff.

What the next few hours would bring forth, Ruth had no way of knowing. She realized only too keenly that her entire future hung in the balance.

Chess's plan had been a daring one. It remained to be seen whether or not he could furnish absolute proof of Ruth's innocence when the party reached the Los Angeles warehouse. Should he fail, Ruth knew that it would be impossible to hold Mrs. Spitz. Although the rangers and Ruth's friends were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that Mrs. Spitz was guilty of forging Pudkin's handwriting, it would be impossible to convince the public or a court without more definite evidence.

If Chess failed to prove this case, things would only look worse than ever for Ruth.

"You're nervous, Ruth," Helen observed, as she took Ruth's hand and held it in her own.

Ruth laughed shakily.

"You'd be nervous, too, if your entire future depended upon this trip. If we fail to prove that Mrs. Spitz tampered with the scenario, Hollywood will be unbearable for me. I'll be pointed out, jeered at, even more than I am now. And there's something else I hadn't mentioned——"

"What is that?" Tom asked quickly, taking his eyes from the road and turning them upon Ruth.

"Day before yesterday I received a letter from the International Scenario Contest committee, asking me to file a complete answer to the charge Mrs. Spitz has made against me. The implication is, of course, that if I can't prove I actually wrote the scenario, the prize will likely be revoked."

"But the money has been invested in another picture," Helen protested. "They couldn't make you give it back, could they?"

"I don't know. I haven't looked up the legal end of it."

"How do you suppose the committee learned of the matter so soon?" Tom asked. "From the newspapers?"

"I judge Mrs. Spitz sent a letter. It would be the first thing she would think of."

"We're going to have that woman in jail before another day is over," Chess said grimly.

"But if you fail to prove—" Ruth began.

"I won't fail!" Chess returned firmly.

His assurance gave Ruth confidence, and she brightened a little. Chess glanced at his watch.

"It will be just about dawn when we reach town," he predicted.

"We can't get into the warehouse for several hours, then," Ruth observed.

"No, but we must look up Pudkin's relatives first, and I want to see that handwriting expert before we go to the warehouse. Then we can get breakfast."

"I'm sure I don't want any breakfast," Ruth broke in. "I couldn't eat."

"Here either," Tom added, for Ruth's worries were as vital to him as his own.

"Then we'll check breakfast off the list. Keep up your courage, Ruth. You'll come through this all right."

"Oh, if only I do! I must clear my name! I'll be grateful to you for the rest of my life, Chess."

"I haven't helped you yet," Chess replied. "But I think everything will come out all right."

During the remainder of the ride there was little attempt at conversation. Tom was intent on

driving, and the other three were lost in thought. Chess was not in a comfortable state of mind, though he tried to keep the fact from his friends. He, too, wondered what the next few hours would bring forth.

At the outskirts of the city Tom stopped the car at the edge of the pavement and waited until the rangers drew up alongside of them.

"Have any trouble?" Chess asked the driver of the car, in an undertone.

"Maggie Dover tried to jump out of the car, but we got her just in time. Otherwise everything went all right."

It was agreed that every one save Tom and Chess were to go directly to the warehouse and wait there until the doors were opened. Tom and Chess planned to go to the home of Pudkin's relatives and also to the office of the handwriting expert before meeting the others at the warehouse.

Accordingly, as soon as it was seven o'clock, Chess and Tom took the roadster and looked up the various addresses.

"To my knowledge, only two of Pudkin's relatives are living," Chess explained to Tom as they drove through the streets of Los Angeles. "Two cousins by the name of Brownell. They had never heard of this talk about the scenario until it came out in the newspapers. At first they were inclined to believe the newspaper story, but after

I talked with them, they seemed to swing over to my way of thinking."

"You intend to take them with us to the warehouse?"

"Yes, they have the key to the trunks. I want to pick up this handwriting expert too and take him along. Everything really hinges on him."

"How about notifying the authorities?" Tom next asked. "If Mrs. Spitz sees that she is caught, she may make a break to get away. If we can absolutely prove that she is guilty, it's our duty to turn her over to the police."

Chess hesitated.

"I guess you're right, Tom. If we shouldn't be able to prove our case, we'd be in a mess all right—but I think we can. We'll notify the police and have them on hand."

Half an hour later, Tom and Chess reached the warehouse with the Brownell cousins and the handwriting expert. Mrs. Spitz eyed them nervously, but defiantly.

"You'll pay for this insult," she declared again, as she was led inside the warehouse.

Under Chess's direction, a trunk was hauled out of a locker. Ruth watched Mrs. Spitz' face as Chess unlocked it, and she saw all the color leave the woman's face.

"Is this Pudkin's trunk?" Chess demanded, turning to the rooming house landlady, who by this time was trembling with fright.

"It looks something like it." The woman was afraid to commit herself.

"Did you have a key to this trunk?" Chess next fired pointblank at her.

"I did have a key to Pudkin's trunk. I found it in his room after I had sent the trunk here. It was a duplicate, I guess."

"Why did you fail to mail the key to the Brownell cousins as soon as you found it?"

The woman looked ill at ease.

"I—I was going to, but I was busy."

"Have you the key now?"

The woman hesitated again, apparently trying to think of an answer which would not condemn her.

"I lost it," she brought out triumphantly.

"You mean," Chess corrected her, "that you gave it to Mrs. Spitz."

"She didn't give it to me!" Mrs. Spitz fairly screamed. "I never saw her old key nor that trunk!"

Chess ignored this and turned to the Brownell cousins.

"You told me, did you not, that when you examined Pudkin's trunk after it had been shipped from Hollywood you found that goods of considerable value had disappeared?"

"Yes," the two cousins agreed promptly.

"If you're accusin' me of takin' stuff—" the landlady began, but Chess cut her short.

"You haven't been accused of anything—yet."

Chess removed a manuscript from the trunk and handed it to Ruth. It was the original of "Storm Tossed," and she found it identical with the copy the Brownell cousins had furnished the newspapers. In this copy, however, her quick eyes detected where ink remover had been used.

Chess motioned Mrs. Spitz into a chair and handed her paper, pen, and ink.

"Write what I tell you to," he commanded.

"I won't write a word."

"You'll do as I tell you," Chess snapped.

Mrs. Spitz eyed him sullenly a moment, then dipped the pen in the ink.

Chess took the copy of "Storm Tossed" from Ruth and read a sentence from the big storm scene.

"Write that!" he directed.

"I won't!" Mrs. Spitz threw the pen down so that it splashed the paper.

"Then you'll go to jail," Chess told her sternly. "This is your only chance to prove your innocence."

Suddenly changing her mind, Mrs. Spitz picked up the pen and began to write with an elaborate scrawl. It was obvious to all who watched that she was deliberately changing her handwriting.

Sentence by sentence, Chess read the passage, forcing Mrs. Spitz to copy it exactly.

"There! I hope you are satisfied!" Mrs. Spitz said, with an evil smile. She felt that she had successfully disguised her handwriting.

Chess took the sheet of paper and handed it with the original of "Storm Tossed" to the handwriting expert.

"Now, tell us what you think about it," he directed.

The man accepted the two sheets and studied them carefully for nearly five minutes before he spoke.

"Obviously, there has been a studied attempt to disguise the handwriting," he said at last, "but if you will look at the A's and R's of the two specimens you will see that they are practically identical. In fact, this passage which has just been written is very like the passage of the scenario."

"Is it your opinion that this woman filled in the questionable scenes of the manuscript?" Chess asked eagerly.

"Yes, I am willing to say that."

"And will you swear to it in court?"

"Certainly. Any handwriting expert will back up my opinion. The forgery was not a skillful piece of work."

Mrs. Spitz sprang to her feet, her face convulsed with anger and fear.

"I didn't do it!" she shouted. "You've tricked me!" She wheeled about like an en-

raged animal and faced her accomplice. "She did it—I didn't! She's nothing more than a common thief! She took things from Pudkin's trunk!"

"You squealer!" the landlady hissed. "If I go to jail, you'll go too! You came to me and got the key to the trunk! You said you wanted to get even with Ruth Fielding. You changed the manuscript so it would read like the prize scenario, and then you saw to it that the newspapers got the story!"

"I guess that finishes you," Chess said quietly.

"Finishes me nothing!" Mrs. Spitz made a wild break for the door.

She found herself blocked by two uniformed men.

"The police!" she gasped.

"I expected this, and took the precaution to have them outside," Chess stated. "They have heard everything."

Mrs. Spitz dropped down into a chair, moaning. She realized now that there was no possible escape.

"There is one thing I want to clear up," Ruth said, addressing Mrs. Spitz. "Was it you who wrote the anonymous letters which were sent to members of my company?"

Mrs. Spitz nodded.

"I've always hated you, Ruth Fielding. You think you're so high and mighty. You——"

She never finished the sentence, for a policeman touched her on the shoulder.

"Come along, Maggie Dover. We've seen you before, haven't we?"

"She has been in court before?" Ruth asked.

"Oh, yes, she served time for forging a check," the policeman answered. "She won't get such a light sentence this time."

Although the two women protested and struggled, they were forced to go with the officers. After they had left, the Brownell cousins turned to Ruth and expressed their regret at having unwittingly been a party to Mrs. Spitz' malicious scheme. Ruth bore them no grudge, for she knew they had acted in good faith.

Ruth and her friends thanked the two rangers for their help, and Chess paid the handwriting expert for his services. Then the four went back to the automobile.

"I guess this clears you, Ruth," Chess grinned. "Don't you think I'm a good little detective?"

"You're a wonder," Ruth declared enthusiastically. "I don't know how I'll ever thank you."

"My dear Ruth, can't a fellow help a friend? I don't want any reward." He glanced at Helen. "That is, not unless Helen wants to give me a kiss for my faithful work."

Helen glared at him.

"I suppose you want it here on the street with every one looking at us."

"I don't care where I get it, just so I get it."

"I'll think it over when we get home."

"All right, that's a promise. We can't get there any too soon to suit me. Step on the gas, Tom!"

Tom did drive rapidly, for every one was tired and eager to get back to Hollywood. As the car sped smoothly over the pavement, a heavy weight seemed to have fallen from them all.

"Tom and I were actually wondering if you and Helen hadn't quarreled," Ruth told Chess.

"Quarreled?" Chess gave Helen a squeeze. "Well, I should say not! Now that I have this detective business off my hands, I don't intend to let Helen get out of my sight."

"And I'm going to see to it that Ruth gets a good rest," Tom said masterfully.

"You won't need to force me to take one," Ruth replied, smiling wanly. "I feel like Rip Van Winkle this very minute. If some one would offer me a bed I could sleep a million years."

"I'm tired too," Helen yawned. "This has been a big night."

"It's morning now," Chess reminded her.

"Now that my work is finished and I don't have to worry about Mrs. Spitz, I'd like to go back to the Red Mill for a little vacation," Ruth said slowly, more to herself than for the benefit of the others.

"Why not all go?" Tom questioned enthusiasti-

cally. "We can wind up everything here in a few days and be ready to leave."

At once they began to discuss plans for the return trip to the Red Mill. Presently, Tom noticed that Ruth was not taking an active part in the conversation. Her face was clouded, and it was apparent that she was not thinking of what the others were saying.

"What is it that worries you?" Tom asked gently. "You needn't worry about Mrs. Spitz any more. Your name has been cleared."

Ruth turned troubled eyes upon him.

"But is my name really cleared, Tom?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, will the public believe the truth? You know as well as I, that once a newspaper has broadcast a story it is likely to hurt a person's reputation, even if the story is later denied."

"Surely the public will not turn against you," Helen insisted.

"That remains to be seen. I won't know until after this last picture has been released. If 'The Pride of Ardale' is well received, then I'll know that my name has really been cleared. Until then, I can't be certain."

CHAPTER XXV

RUTH'S GREAT TRIUMPH

"TELL me, Ruthie dear, how do I look? Do you think this dress will pass inspection?"

Helen Cameron, in a flutter of excitement, had entered Ruth's bedroom and now pranced up and down, pausing only long enough to preen before the full-length mirror. She was dressed in a lovely evening gown of blue chiffon and tulle, a gown she was wearing for the first time.

Ruth smiled, for she knew that Helen was only begging for compliments in a polite way.

"You look perfectly gorgeous," she declared promptly. "Wait until Chess sees you."

"He's waiting now—downstairs. Do you think he will like my dress?"

"I don't think he'll devote much time to your gown," Ruth replied. "Not when your eyes are dancing as they are to-night."

"I'll box his ears if he doesn't notice my dress," Helen announced. "I bought this dress specially for to-night, and I paid—well, I gave too much for it, but there will never be another night like this."

"Perhaps you are right."

The tone of Ruth's voice caused Helen to turn from the mirror and stare at her chum. For the first time she noticed that Ruth had made no attempt to don her own beautiful salmon-colored evening gown.

"Why, what in the world is the matter?" Helen cried anxiously, as she ran to her chum and flung her arms about her. "I should think you would be thrilled to death. Never has Hollywood given such a big party for any one—not even a star!"

"I am pleased and grateful, Helen." With a sigh Ruth arose and picked up the shimmering gown of spangles and beads. "I appreciate this honor my friends are bestowing upon me. It's only that——"

"What?" Helen asked, as Ruth hesitated.

"It's only that I can't help but worry about what may come after the banquet."

"You mean when we all go to the theater to see the first showing of 'The Pride of Ardale'?"

"Yes," Ruth said simply.

Helen laughed lightly.

"Don't worry about that. It's a great picture."

"I'm not worried on that score."

"What does trouble you, then?"

Ruth turned to Helen with eyes that were almost tragic.

"Suppose the people don't turn out for the picture, Helen? When our party reaches the theater, we may find that it's practically empty. Oh, the humiliation of that!"

"No chance of anything like that."

"But there is a chance of it, Helen," Ruth insisted. "Mr. Hammond is afraid, too. Look what happened to the picture Mrs. Spitz backed. The public turned it down flat."

It was true that after Mrs. Craven-Spitz had been convicted of forgery the backers of the Rose Bower film had placed her picture on the market, with the result that it had gone down in moving picture history as the greatest failure in years. The failure of the picture had brought ruin and bankruptcy to the Rose Bower Film Company. Mrs. Spitz, who had invested everything she had in the company, was left penniless.

"No wonder the public turned that picture down," Helen declared promptly. "It was a complete wash out. If it had been billed as a comedy it might have gone over—but as a drama!" Helen threw up her hands in a gesture of despair. "Anyhow, Mrs. Spitz was ruined when the story all came out in the newspapers. When she does get out of jail she won't dare show her face."

"Publicity has ruined more than one director," Ruth reminded Helen. "I'm afraid it may spell my ruin."

"But your name has been cleared, Ruth."

"I can't consider it cleared until I know that the public accepts me the same as before," Ruth answered soberly. "For the last two months there has been a big question in my mind. That question will be answered for me to-night."

Helen had not realized how much Ruth had worried over the attitude of the public toward her, for during the two months that Ruth and her friends had idled at Cheslow, she had seldom mentioned the subject. As soon as Ruth had finished "The Pride of Ardale" for Mr. Hammond she had taken the train for Cheslow and the Red Mill, accompanied by Helen, Chess, and Tom.

There the four had spent a delightful vacation. They had returned to Hollywood, and Ruth had been welcomed back more warmly than ever before. Her friends had insisted upon giving a banquet for her at the finest hotel in the city, and following the banquet arrangements had been made for the entire party to go to the theater to see the initial showing of Ruth's latest picture.

"I'm sorry if I've bothered you with my worries," Ruth said slowly. "I'll hurry and dress now and will be downstairs in fifteen minutes."

After Helen had closed the door behind her, Ruth went to the telephone and called Mr. Hammond.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked. "How is the advance?"

"Well, not so good," Mr. Hammond admitted. "But you can't always tell by that. We'll hope for the best."

Ruth hung up the receiver and forced herself to begin dressing for the banquet. She dreaded the thought of living through the evening.

When Ruth greeted Tom and Chess in the drawing room, she had sternly put aside her trouble and at once entered into the spirit of gaiety.

"You look wonderful to-night," Tom whispered, as they stepped into the taxi which was to whisk them to the hotel.

That was not the only compliment Ruth received that night. Had she been a vain girl, her head would have been completely turned, for she was praised by every one. The banquet was an elaborate one, with every detail carried out perfectly. On every side, Ruth recognized loyal friends, and she made a point of speaking to as many as she could.

She was pleased to see that Jack Markham and Fred Orman were among the guests. Although the food was delicious, Ruth only made a pretense of eating.

Mr. Hammond, too, scarcely touched his food, Ruth noticed. He presided at the banquet and joined in the merriment, but there were tired, worried lines on his face.

"Oh, if only it were all over!" Ruth told herself. "If only I knew the worst!"

At length the last course was served, the last toast to Ruth was given, and the party broke up.

"Now for the theater, folks!" Mr. Hammond cried, but his voice held a note that Ruth understood only too well.

The automobiles rolled up to the door and were loaded, one after another. As Ruth and her party approached the big moving picture house where "The Pride of Ardale" was to be shown for the first time, Ruth began to twist her handkerchief in her hands, and the others shared her nervousness.

They had purposely left the hotel late, so that they would arrive at the theater just as the picture was starting. As she stepped from the taxicab, Ruth noticed with a sinking heart that few persons appeared to be entering the theater.

"The picture is a failure," she told herself miserably.

A box had been reserved for Ruth and her party, with Mr. Hammond and his friends in the one adjoining. Ruth passed through the lobby and into the darkened theater. The title of the picture was just being flashed on the screen.

In the doorway, Ruth stopped short and stared.

Every seat in the entire theater appeared to be

filled. The aisles were crowded with those who could not find seats.

"Tom!" Ruth whispered. "I can hardly believe it!" Tears of joy came into her eyes.

"We all thought it would turn out this way," Tom whispered back.

They were ushered to their box by a uniformed attendant and quietly took their seats. Ruth settled down in her chair and watched the picture intently, for although she had seen the separate scenes projected, she had never witnessed the showing of the picture since it had been assembled.

When the college mob scene was flashed upon the screen, Helen giggled outright, as she located herself in the picture.

"That's me," she whispered to Chess. "The funny looking one on the left."

"Funny looking nothing!" Chess snorted. "You're more beautiful than the star!"

During the picture, Tom had watched Ruth's face more than he had the white screen. This night she was viewing her work, not as a critic, but as an ordinary spectator unversed in technique.

Ruth turned to face Tom, and her hand crept into his.

"Tell me," she whispered. "Is it really good?"

"It's wonderful!" Tom returned promptly, but

he was looking at Ruth and not at the screen.

The last scene was projected upon the screen. The picture had been good, Ruth knew, by the silence that had crept over the audience. Suddenly the lights were snapped on.

Some one in the audience below the box stood up and pointed toward Ruth.

"There is Ruth Fielding!" he cried.

Immediately there was a tumult of clapping and every one stood up.

"Speech! Speech!" they cried.

Ruth turned to Tom in consternation.

"What shall I do?" she asked.

"Get up and say something," Tom urged.

Ruth arose to her feet, but for once she found that words had deserted her. The audience seemed to understand, for as one man they cheered her. The shouts echoed and reëchoed through the great theater. It was Hollywood's way of telling Ruth Fielding that her name had been cleared.

THE END

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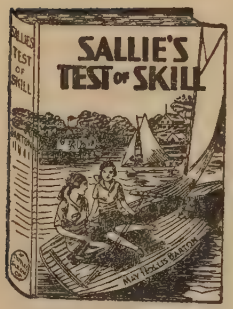

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